

November 6, 2012

Tuesday

The party was in full swing by eleven. Troy lost count of all the people who came up to shake his hand and clap him on the back. The bar was full, bursting at the seams. When the rest of the crew finished up at the station they would have to find somewhere else to celebrate. It seemed like the whole country was celebrating.

He was flying high on victory and a few shots of expensive scotch, his face sore from smiling. Folded up neatly in his jacket pocket like a talisman rested a copy of his new contract, tying him to the easiest job in the world for the next two years. Every once a while, his fingers would travel up to touch it again. Who knows what the future held now? The position of a Press Secretary to the White House? Everything suddenly seemed within reach.

The HD screens placed around the bar showed the news clips from the coverage of the election. He was sure that he would never get tired of seeing them, especially the mind-baffling incredulity of the Fox News anchors as their own analysts gave the Ohio's electoral votes to the President, pushing him over the two-seventy mark. The incredible rush of watching the swing states turn blue, one by one. By the time the polls closed in Florida, the game was long over; despite winning in North Carolina, the Republican candidate had lost.

Troy had been on the air when it all went down, diligently adding the electoral votes for his audience. His lucky break; Samantha Boyes had picked a perfect day to come down with the flu. He followed the protocol along with CNN, NBC and countless of others, playing the Republican nominee's concession speech along with the Victory speech from the re-elected President. Afterwards, NBC took to the streets to film the celebration. CNN focused on trying to pin point what exactly went wrong in the state of Florida. Fox News bashed everyone from the liberal media to the Governor of New Jersey for the failures of their candidate. Troy went rogue.

In the middle of two wars and a serious economic crisis, the people had chosen to re-elect a Democratic President who promised to end both wars and cut the deficit in half over the course of the next four years. Troy laid out the facts of life. As the former president Bill Clinton had pointed out during the Democratic convention, it was all a matter of arithmetic; one thing Troy had always been good at. What the President proposed to do was possible, but it would have consequences. Troy ruthlessly laid them out, not bothering to sugar coat any of the information. He didn't have to. The election was over and his President had won. It was time to strap it on and get to work.

Within an hour he was quoted by NBC, then CNN, and finally by BBC. At the station, the phones started ringing off the hook; requests for interviews poured in by the dozens. His new contract was drafted in the record time, showing a significant increase in pay, his third increase in the last year alone.

Two hours later he was watching himself on the big screen and feeling invincible.

None of it was about the money. It would have never occurred to him to refuse any of the raises thrown his way, but the money had always been the last of his worries. He'd had the benefit of being born into money as well as learning, very early on in life, that money could not buy any of the things that really mattered. Most of them he'd had to earn through patience and hard work, and even then, some things remained forever out of his reach.

No, money had nothing to do with it. His life's work centered around the truth. He refused to coddle his audience; there was a difference between optimism and plain ignorance, a difference not many people understood. Why should his audience be petted and comforted while the economy was heading down the shitter? He despised a good deal of his peers; the talking heads who leaned with the wind, afraid to step on someone's toes. Troy might be the guy who was continuously shoved in his locker during his High School years, who remained a virgin until his second year of college, but he was also the guy who looked the Vice President straight in the eye and demanded to know how he intended to cut seven hundred million dollars out of Medicare without passing the cost down onto its recipients.

Laura faithfully stuck by his side while he ordered another drink. He intended to get completely and utterly wasted by the time the bar closed. She'd promised to keep an eye on him. In a record two-hour span he'd become a valuable asset to the company, someone to be protected from bad publicity. God forbid there was a picture on the cover of the next day's Enquirer of PBNC's favorite news anchor draped around some drunk boy. He grinned into his glass.

Two of his colleagues had him pretty much boxed in against the bar. Melinda, who twice a week hosted 'The Economy Today' was only on her second drink, although judging by the flush creeping up her cheeks, even two drinks were a little too much. She was fired up already, shooting off numbers with a dizzying speed, not letting Bryan get a word in edgewise. Bryan, the Sunday morning star of 'Close Politics', seemed mainly amused. Without a doubt, he was a hair away from accusing her of spouting 'liberal mumbo-jumbo' at which point Melinda would probably dump her drink on his head. The entertainment as usual. Troy tucked himself in closer to the bar, not relishing the thought of getting splattered by some tropical blue sludge that reeked of coconut.

That's when he saw him.

A genuine 'wow' moment for Troy who was beginning to think that nothing in the world could stop him in his tracks any more. He simply could not look away. If someone had asked him at that moment to explain what exactly had struck him with such force, he would have been speechless.

It wasn't the impressively sculpted face or the smile that Troy realized was drawing most of the eyes in the bar. Not the exquisite curve of the neck or the curtain of sleek, pale hair. Perhaps a combination of it all and something

more, the playful tilt of the head, the flash of white teeth, the long fingers trailing down the surface of a wine glass. An unexpected ball of heat coiled in Troy's stomach. When was the last time he reacted so strongly to a man at the first sight? Ever? It was mind boggling. He didn't know what to do with it.

As if sensing he was being watched, the stranger met his eyes across the bar. Troy blushed unconsciously. The eyes watching him were clearly green, ringed by long, pale eyelashes.

No one should look like that. It was cruel. Troy pictured himself the way the stranger must see him; round face, unruly brown hair, glasses, a thirty-four year old man who always shaved because he never got the hang of growing an actual beard. His more generous lovers had called him 'adorable'; those not so generous had stuck with 'sweet'. A thirty-four year old man who had thrown up in a trash can while trying to film his first TV show. His euphoria vanished under the scrutiny of the other man's gaze. One flawless eyebrow arched slightly, as if to ask if Troy had a problem. It was an excellent question, one he was already asking himself while blushing harder and looking away.

"Who is that?" Laura hissed next to his ear.

"Jesus, don't stare," he snapped quietly, "How should I know?"

She was already yanking Melinda closer and whispering into her ear. Melinda gazed across the bar and her eyes widened. Troy buried his face in his glass, mortified by their behavior and sure that he'd looked just as stupid only moments ago. Now Bryan was staring too although he, thankfully, was nowhere close to drooling.

"I wouldn't get excited," Bryan snorted, "You gotta have quite a bit of money to get his attention."

Troy gave up his attempt to kick Laura's stool, "What do you mean?"

"He's probably here to pick up some business; from the looks of him, it won't come cheap."

Melinda spluttered, "That's ridiculous! And discriminating."

"Discriminating against whom? The city hookers?"

"Against a complete stranger you know nothing about!"

"I know he's two surgeries away from a Barbie doll."

"Can you sound like more of a douchebag? You do know he's still a person, right?"

"I'm sorry, so you just spent a full minute gaping at him because of his personality?"

Melinda looked ready to bite, "Why do you have to be such an asshole all the time?"

"That's how I make my living, sweetheart."

She slammed her glass on the bar, the stinky blue concoction splashing on Troy's sleeve. Wonderful, just what he was trying to avoid.

"I'm going to talk to him. I'm sure he doesn't make his living being an asshole."

"You wanna bet?" Bryan quipped back.

"Dick."

She disappeared into the crowd with Laura's shout following her, "You go girl!"

Troy drained the rest of his scotch in one gulp hoping that would bring the bartender back. With a little luck the man might have a rag Troy could use to soak up his sleeve. Bryan looked like he'd just swallowed a hefty rock and was attempting to digest it.

Troy cleared his throat, "Are you off tomorrow?"

"Um.. no. Not tomorrow."

"How come?"

"We're doing the round table thing. Me, Janice, Al and Melinda. The post-election coverage. Four hours."

Troy had done the post election coverage two years ago. He'd completely forgotten about it.

Bryan finished his drink too, looking everywhere but the direction in which Melina disappeared, "You, Mr. Big-Shot, get your regular hour slot. We get to cluck at each other like hens. I can't wait."

"I liked doing it."

"Well you can take my place any time. It'll be like trying to reason with the Left Wing Tea Party. I might as well hang up my hat right now."

"Oh, it's not so bad," Troy grinned, "We're all on the same side, aren't we?"

"Are we? If that side involves common sense, I'm not so sure. Al seems to think that raising the taxes on the top two percent of income earners can pay for the ten trillion dollar deficit. Does that sound like a good plan to you?"

"It's a start."

"Of what? We both know that's not nearly enough. The spending will have to get cut too. You leave out Medicare, Medicaid and the military and what do we have left to cut? Measly eighteen percent. What is that gonna do?"

"I'm starting to think you didn't watch my show. Cutting that eighteen percent would just make the poor a little poorer. Which might have to be done anyway. At that point, with the increased tax rate, you're looking at reducing the deficit by about seventy five billion a year."

"Why not just let the Bush tax cuts expire in January? Taxes go up for everyone and you double that number."

"Because", Troy went on patiently, "If you raise taxes on the low income earners, they have no money to spend. Their houses get foreclosed on and they lose their jobs. How can that possibly improve the economy? Now, if we were to cut the military spending--"

"Yeah, ok. Now you're just dreaming."

Troy straightened on his stool, "But you know I'm right. If you want, throw the common sense right out the window and just consider how the nature of the warfare has changed over the last two decades."

"You're forgetting that we almost elected a guy who knows nothing about the modern warfare. The idiot was still stuck in the cold war."

"The key word there is 'almost' elected. The people know better."

“The people’ have nothing to do with this and you know it. We’re talking about the forces who supported this idiot. The forces that are still in play and will not allow one single thing they don’t agree with.”
“If you’re talking about the House, I’m sure-“ and there he drifted off, his mouth drying.

He was staring at the green eyes again, now only a couple of feet away. His thoughts scrambled. Perfect was a hollow word for this. For this, the words have not been invented yet.

“Troy?”

He tore his gaze away with effort and saw Melinda’s amused smirk, “This is Sasha.”

Blushing again to the roots of his hair, Troy wiped his damp hand on his jeans and awkwardly stuck it out, “Nice to meet you.”

The stranger clasped his hand, sparks flying off his fingers.

He let go quickly, looking rueful, “Sorry. Shocked you.”

Slight accent crept around his words.

“That’s ok,” Troy blurted out.

“This is Laura,” Melinda went on and Sasha looked away.

Troy took another drink to get rid of his dry mouth and noticed that his hands were shaking, What the fuck was going on with him? He had to get a grip.

“And this is Bryan.”

“Nice to meet you,” Bryan said dryly, “So, what do you do?”

“I’m a freelance interpreter.”

“Oh,” Bryan went on like he couldn’t care less, “which language?”

“Which one do you need?” Sasha countered lightly, catching Bryan off guard.

Elbowing Bryan out of the way, Laura smiled up at the stranger, “What brings you here? To D.C. I mean.”

“A temporary assignment. With CNN.”

Bryan looked as if that rock he’d swallowed earlier was trying to come back up.

“You have an accent,” Laura went on, “Where are you from originally? Your name is Russian, isn’t it?”

“Close. My father was Russian. I’m from Bosnia.”

“A Serb, I presume?” Bryan threw out with a sneer.

The stranger’s eyes flashed but his voice remained even, “You presume wrong.”

“I’m sorry,” Melinda cut in, turning to Bryan, “but weren’t you working for the Cape Cod Times during the Bosnian war? What was the height of their investigative reporting during those years? Oh, that’s right, it was the illegal shooting of wolves.”

A warning twitch began to pulse in Bryan's cheek, "You're correct. I believe you were still in High School, cheering on the Washington-Lee Generals. And working at McDonald's."

For a moment, it seemed as Melinda might just try and throttle him, then luckily, a pile of interns crowded in between them.

They were there to congratulate Troy. He shook hands and answered questions for a while, refusing invitations to at least a dozen parties to be held later. When the interns finally drifted off, Melinda and Bryan were nowhere to be seen. Troy hoped they weren't out in the back alley, trying to beat the crap out of each other. On one side of him, Laura had her head close to Al's, doubtlessly discussing the best way to curb Bryan's negativity during the upcoming round table session. On the other side sat Sasha, almost close enough to touch.

When he noticed Troy staring at him, Sasha inclined his head toward the closest TV screen, "That's pretty impressive."

Troy looked up and saw himself laying out the four year plan for the millionth time. Suddenly, he was embarrassed. Did they have to keep playing it over and over again?

He shrugged, "It's just common sense."

"Maybe. I don't see a lot of it these days."

"Neither do I."

A loud cheer went up somewhere in the back of the bar. Troy wondered why the place now seemed so distracting. He certainly hadn't minded it before.

He leaned in slightly, catching a faint whiff of honeysuckle, "Can I buy you another drink?"

"Sure."

Underneath the honeysuckle there was something even more intoxicating, like a pleasant memory just out of reach. He ached to lean in closer and decipher this mystery scent. Instead he motioned to the bartender with a jerk, almost knocking his own drink over in the process. So much for getting a grip.

A quick glance around the bar confirmed that most people were either staring at him and Sasha, or were pretending not to stare. Troy felt irritated with them all. What possessed him to even come here? It was too loud, too hot and entirely too crowded for comfort.

Making a split second decision, he turned to Laura, "Hey, how about we move the party to my place?"

Her eyebrows climbed into her bangs, "It's almost midnight."

"Exactly. Another hour and we're getting kicked out of here anyway. Might as well go now."

"This isn't gonna be an all-nighter is it? I gotta work tomorrow."

"No, just a couple more hours. Free booze."

She shrugged and turned to Al, "What do you think?"

“Free booze? And me low on cash? I’m in. Want me to spread the word?”

“Please. Oh, and Laura, would you mind trying to find Bryan and Melinda?”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

She slid off her stool, “Wanna call a taxi? Or two?”

“I’m on it.”

The two of them disappeared into the crowd and Troy turned back to Sasha without giving himself a chance to chicken out, “We’re moving the party to my place. Wanna come?”

Sasha shrugged, “I don’t know anyone here.”

“You know me.”

“I do?”

“Ok, maybe not, but isn’t that how you get to know people? By spending time with them?”

“Is that what you wanna do? Spend time with me?”

Troy’s face heated furiously. He opened his mouth then closed it, for the first time in his career at a loss for words.

Sasha spared him having to answer, “Your friend doesn’t like me.”

“Bryan? He’s not my friend. Don’t worry about him, he’s an asshole. To everyone. It’s in his contract.”

Sasha let out a surprised laugh and the sight of it made Troy’s knees grow weak.

“I’d really like it if you came,” he said desperately, wishing it didn’t feel like he was begging.

What was he thinking anyway? This creature sitting next to him only by the purest stroke of luck would never be interested. It was ridiculous to even hope; men like that never looked twice at someone like Troy. Ten minutes with this man and he was acting like a love struck puppy. It would be funny if it didn’t feel so humiliating.

Sasha drained his glass and placed it back on the bar slowly, his small smile a far cry from the earlier laugh, “Sure. I’ll come.”

They ended up crammed in a stifling taxi with Laura and Al in between them. By the time they reached Troy’s neighborhood, he was uncomfortably damp from sweating and thoroughly annoyed with both of them. A group of people already waited on the sidewalk; apparently, Troy had managed to pick the slowest cab driver in the city. They took the elevator to the top floor and he let them loose in the apartment, only having to point to the alcohol before the party was in the full swing again.

The place was enormous by Troy’s standards. The living room and the kitchen were large enough to house six families. The floor to ceiling windows looked out over the entire neighborhood. A hallway to the far left led to an

imposing marble bathroom where two people could comfortably commit suicide in a jacuzzi without getting in each other's way. Past the bathroom gaped the bedroom, a mausoleum ringed by dark curtains and a few pieces of furniture, most of them consisting of overcrowded bookcases. He'd gotten the largest bed he could find and still spent his nights feeling like a small island stranded in a sea of emptiness.

He'd upgraded three months earlier because he could and because it seemed to be expected. That's what people did when they started climbing the corporate ladder. For the same reason he now drove a 2013 BMW 6-series convertible, or more accurately, he paid for it while it sat in the garage. Lately, he'd been thinking that he could get used to the car, but that he might never get used to the apartment.

People began arriving in two's and three's. Someone discovered the extensive sound system and Trombone Shorty was added to the party. Laura seemed to have taken Sasha under her wing and Troy found himself ridiculously grateful for it. He snuck off to his bedroom, gathered up some comfortable clothes and took a ten minute cold shower.

No more drinking tonight. He stepped out of the shower feeling clearheaded and confident. He was a successful news reporter - now a famous news reporter. He'd been quoted by no less than four main news channels. Out there, in his quarter million dollar apartment was an insanely attractive man, who was still only a man. Troy had grilled the Vice President of United States without losing his cool; he was perfectly capable of holding an intelligent conversation with anyone. He was not some damn teenager swooning over a crush. He would quit acting like a spaz.

Stepping out of the bathroom, he was struck with the sudden silence. Then he heard the music.

Sasha was sitting at the piano that Troy had bought at a whim, afterwards treating it like nothing more than an expensive ornament. The people gathered around him were motionless, as if they'd ceased breathing. Laura sat on the arm of the couch with one hand pressed to her throat, a marionette with her strings cut.

Troy felt goosebumps rise on his skin, making him shiver. The music tasted of tears. It was everything unsaid crawling restlessly to the surface; the burning insomnia with no comfort, the darkness found at the bottom of a bottle, the cold and empty bedroom, the futility of everything. An unwanted lump rose in his throat. Sasha rocked back and forth slowly as he played, his face hidden by the curtain of hair. How could he stand it? Troy couldn't. It was awful. If it didn't stop he would scream.

When it did, he was shocked to find himself standing next to the piano and having no memory of how he got there.

Sasha looked up at him and smiled tentatively, seeming unsure for the first time, "Sorry. Your friend talked me into it."

Troy had forgotten how to speak. Faint color rose in Sasha's face and he looked away.

People were clapping and whistling but Troy was barely aware of it. He still felt the music throbbing in his breastbone, an insistent pulse he couldn't shake off.

Laura slid onto the bench next to Sasha and touched his shoulder, "That was beautiful. What was it?"

"Il Vecchio Castello by Mussorgsky."

She bit her lip.

He tilted his head slightly, "Modest Mussorgsky? The composer?"

She shrugged, "Sorry. Classical music is not really my forte."

"He was Russian; the brooding miserable kind. Drank himself to death in 1881."

"Encore!" someone shouted from the kitchen and everyone immediately joined in.

"Oh, please!" Laura added when Sasha looked uncertain, "Just one more."

Sasha looked up at Troy, his eyes unreadable.

Troy managed a faint 'please' then escaped to the kitchen. Soon the sound of The Turkish March followed him and he exhaled a relieved breath he hadn't known he was holding. Only now could he appreciate the man's skill, when the notes did not scrape his soul raw. The Turkish March was not easy to play; even Troy knew this and he was by no means an expert in piano music. He poured himself a glass of water, still feeling rattled. By the time he gathered his wits enough to return to the living room, Sasha had abandoned the piano and no amount of protesting would make him go back to it.

There was no getting close to him now. His circle of admirers had expanded and Troy found himself unwilling to try and push his way in. Instead he chatted with random people, playing the host and avoiding the now silent piano. He was sure that he would never look at the thing the same way again. Yet, even as he avoided the piano, his eyes were continuously drawn to Sasha. He was noticing the small details he hadn't before: the upper lip faintly curving outward, the tiny imperfection of the left eyebrow, the fine creases in the corners of his eyes when he smiled. Troy studied him and grew more anxious as the time passed. Is this how the night would end? With them having barely spoken to each other?

Around two o'clock in the morning, the people began drifting off. When Al finally abandoned his efforts to convert Troy into a liberal in a favor of the search for his coat, Laura, Janice and Sasha were the only ones left. All three of them rose in unison and Troy felt panic. The chances of finding Sasha again in the city of this size were nonexistent. He had to say something, do something before it was too late.

Laura yawned, "Do you wanna share a cab with us?"

Sasha glanced at Troy, and Troy spoke without thinking, “Actually, I was hoping you wouldn’t mind sticking around for a few minutes. If you’re not too tired. I’d like to ask your opinion on... a... French translation I’ve come across.”

Well, that definitely topped the list of stupid things that had come out of his mouth. Ever. He could feel Laura’s startled gaze but refused to meet it. All Sasha had to say was that he didn’t speak French. Or that he was tired, or that he’d had too much to drink. Troy had given him an endless number of ways to say no.

Instead, Sasha shrugged, “Sure.”

Afterwards, Troy could barely remember seeing the rest of them out. He returned to the living room, the half-empty glass of water still clutched in his hand. He found Sasha next to the far right window, leaning slightly against the wall, his eyes focused on some point in the distance. Troy had had some vague intention of asking him out to diner. Instead, he found himself speechless again.

“That’s quite the view.” Sasha said.

Troy agreed wholeheartedly.

Turning away, Sasha studied him for a moment then approached slowly. He reached up and caught a lock of Troy’s hair.

“Your hair is still wet.”

His tone was light enough but his eyes seemed cautious. Troy’s breath lodged in his throat. He resisted the urge to lean into the touch, to try and feel its warmth on his cheek. The scent of honeysuckle was stronger now but the mystery scent still hovered just beyond the reach.

“There is no French translation, is there?”

Feeling vulnerable, Troy shook his head.

“I didn’t think so,” Sasha said, leaned in closer and kissed him.

Troy’s mind shorted out. His heart stuttered, his knees threatened to fold. Sasha’s tongue slipped into his mouth, sending an electric current down his spine that was so intense, it bordered on painful. The glass slipped out of his nerveless fingers, hit the floor and shattered. He whimpered into Sasha’s mouth, latching on to his shoulders for balance. Within moments he was embarrassingly aroused, drowning in heat. His body curved towards Sasha on its own and soft hair brushed his face, enveloping him in the mystery scent. Sasha’s hands wrapped around his waist, pulling him closer, urging him on. If this was just another dream, Troy never wanted to wake up.

“Bedroom.” Sasha whispered against his lips. Not trusting his voice, he took Sasha’s hand and pulled him towards the hallway.

They were kissing again before even crossing the threshold, the urgency growing, their breaths echoing in the silence. Troy tangled his fingers in Sasha’s hair, afraid the man would pull away, afraid he would change his mind. He let go only when Sasha tugged on back of his shirt, trying to pull it off without breaking the kiss. Troy struggled with the delicate buttons of Sasha’s shirt then gave up, his lips locking on the exposed part of the man’s pale shoulder. Sasha let out a small sound of surprise, his fingers digging into Troy’s back.

When he attacked Troy’s belt with a fury, a vague doubt finally began to form. Is this what he wanted? Hadn’t he intended to ask Sasha out to diner? To talk to him, to get to know him? A part of Troy’s mind insisted he was being an idiot. Was he really complaining that Sasha seemed in such a hurry to get into his pants? Even a one night stand was more than Troy had the right to expect.

“Wait,” he said and Sasha froze.

The fine blonde hairs under Troy’s fingers put silk to shame; a delicate silver chain hung around Sasha’s throat, supporting a plain crucifix. He wanted to know more about this man. He wanted to hear him laugh again. He met Sasha’s eyes and found them guarded.

“Are you - is this what you want?”

Sasha shivered visibly at his words and closed his eyes as if shutting him out. Then he was pulling him close again, his mouth landing on Troy’s hard enough to bruise. If Troy had though him frantic before, it was nothing compared to this. His belt went flying, his pants slid down and he stumbled trying to get out of them while Sasha pulled him towards the bed. The ball of heat in his stomach roared into wildfire, pushing the vague disappointment out of the way. Sasha’s pants disappeared with no help from Troy and in two steps they were on the bed, Sasha crawling in between his legs, his body sliding against Troys.

The contact almost finished him off; he moaned desperately, arching up to meet him. God, but it had been too long. Sasha pressed against him, all smooth hot skin and Troy cried out, digging his fingers into the man’s thighs in an effort to slow him down, knowing he wouldn’t last long like this. With a low growl Sasha snatched his hands and pinned them down. Attacking Troy’s mouth again he began to thrust forward, trapping them both in slick skin and the heat of their bodies. Unable to move an inch, Troy though he would lose his mind. This was a far cry from all of his awkward experiences, from all of his cautious partners. Sasha sunk his teeth into the soft flesh below his ear and in an unexpected flash of pain, Troy’s world crumbled. For the first time in his life he came without a warning, his strangled sob directed somewhere at the gloomy ceiling. Sasha followed him swiftly, silently, a sharp intake of breath and a pulse against Troy’s stomach the only signs that he was done too.

Their breaths fell heavy in the emptiness. Troy stared at the ceiling, curiously hollow. He twisted his hands slightly, the tingles warning him that they were about to turn numb. Sasha jerked up, releasing him.

“Did I hurt you?”

Troy shook his head, wondering why Sasha looked guilty, wondering why he himself felt unsatisfied.

“No. You didn’t hurt me.”

Why did that sound like a lie?

“Good.”

Troy thought that they should probably both get cleaned up, but he wasn’t ready to let Sasha slip away. He was still unsure that the man was really there. He tugged on Sasha’s arm.

Sasha hesitated for a moment then stretched out next to him, his head coming to rest on Troy’s shoulder. Pulling the blanket over, Troy covered them both. He found himself smoothing a hand down the curve of Sasha’s spine, determined never to forget what his skin felt like. They lay there silently, wrapped around each other until Troy fell asleep.

November 7, 2012

Wednesday

Sasha woke up before the sky began to lighten. He vaguely wondered if Troy knew that he’d left his curtains wide open.

They had fallen asleep with their bodies touching but at some point Sasha had drifted away from him to the very edge of the bed. It was an old habit, the same one which had woken him up so early, cautioning that he was in someone else’s bed and that it was time to leave. Without his glasses and with his face relaxed by sleep, Troy looked like a small boy in an oversized bed. Something about the curve of his back and the faint ridges of his spine struck Sasha as incredibly fragile. An odd sense of protectiveness came over him and he almost laughed at the absurdity of it. He gently pulled the blankets over, hiding the fragility from the view. A part of him hoped that Troy would wake up and reach for him again. A part of him hoped he would wake up and ask Sasha why he hasn’t left yet, breaking this odd spell that Sasha couldn’t seem to shake off on his own. Troy only sighed deeply in his sleep, leaving Sasha alone and wide awake in a strange bed. It was time to go.

Crawling off the bed silently, he gathered his clothes and got dressed in the living room. By the time he was ready to leave, the gray light of the early dawn had snuck its way into the apartment, pushing the comforting darkness away. He could see himself now; a lone stranger in an unfamiliar place, an impostor. He hated the early mornings. Hated

and feared them. Last night he might have been a Prince but this morning he was just the same old Sasha, lips bruised, skin smelling of sex. How many mornings have caught him sneaking out of some random bed, some random apartment? Too many to count.

Last night was supposed to be different. Troy was different, wasn't he? There was a sweetness about him that Sasha would have never expected. No one had ever stopped to ask Sasha if he was sure. If this was what he wanted. Was that why Troy had seemed so fragile this morning? Because Sasha had neglected to ask him the same?

The broken glass caught his eye and he shivered, remembering the moment Troy had dropped it, remembering the sound he'd made. He knew he should just leave it be, even as he was searching for something to sweep it up with. Once the shards were disposed of, he found himself looking for another reason to stay. Maybe he should leave his number. Just in case.

He'd actually pulled the piece of paper out of the fax machine in the corner and was searching for a pen when he recalled the look in Bryan's eyes with a startling clarity. It was like the man knew.

He sunk down on the piano bench, the paper clutched in his hand. Sasha had a gift for placing faces; he'd never met the man before. Yet somehow, Bryan knew. If it had been only an assumption, it had been an accurate one. Would the man keep it to himself? What would Troy think if he was ever faced with it? Would he regret letting Sasha into his apartment, into his bed?

Leaving his number was out of the question.

He looked down at the piece of paper and found that he'd folded it into a flower, a lotus like blossom nestled on two wide leaves.

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He had to walk two blocks before he could find a taxi. There was probably a bus stop somewhere within a walking distance, but he was too tired to search for it. He didn't know this neighborhood. It was deserted and peaceful, a world removed from reality. Faintly, in the distance, he could still hear the sounds of the city. How much did one have to pay for this silence of gray stone and towering elks? Money oozed down the apartment buildings which were built to imitate the mansions of old, from the exquisite moldings to the marble entrance halls.

The taxi driver did not chatter at him and Sasha was grateful.

If he was to be completely honest with himself, he'd met Troy only so he could shoot him down. Even across the crowded bar he'd recognized the look in his eyes, having observed its like in numerous men over the years. No introductions were necessary; even had Sasha not seen him before, he'd watched the Election coverage like everyone else. On screen, Troy was cocky and insufferable, a political science whiz who had doubtlessly swallowed a dictionary as a child. As he followed the dark-haired girl through the crowded bar, he'd prepared himself to meet a man well aware of his worth whose ego would be noticeably inflated after the overwhelming publicity.

Instead he met a man who still blushed like a teenager. Who, at times, seemed hopelessly awkward. By the time Troy had asked him back to the apartment, Sasha didn't know what to think. The refusal had been on the tip of his tongue when that awkward Troy, the one who was nowhere to be found when conversing with the interns, had looked at him with an expression which clearly said that he knew he'd be refused. Knew it and expected it. He looked at Sasha like Sasha was something extraordinary, something unattainable. For a few moments, the man radiated loneliness. So Sasha had said yes.

It was the piano that undid him. The look in Troy's eyes which said that he understood, even if no one else did. In that moment he'd known that Troy was different. That his sweetness and awkwardness were not just masks he wore off screen. A ridiculous urge had overtaken him to get Troy away from that bleak apartment with its impersonal, stainless appliances and monstrous windows. To take him somewhere warm, with just a simple comfort of the stars overhead. He'd fought that urge and he'd won, tumbling him in a vast, dark bedroom as if punishing them both for that earlier connection that refused to be explained.

The taxi stopped with a jolt, startling him out of his thoughts. He fumbled for his wallet, hoping he had enough to cover the fare. It turned out to be just enough. He would fast again this week.

Fresh graffiti stained the front of his building. To the left of the entrance, two cardboard boxes twitched as someone inside of them fought nightmares. Inside, the police tape crisscrossed one of the doors to the ground apartments. Sasha's place was on the first floor, a one room space with a closet sized bathroom. He called it his studio apartment, wondering how other people imagined it when described it as such. Probably in no way close to the truth.

As soon as he opened the door, Zarya tangled in between his legs, meowing insistently.

"Shit," he sighed, "Shit. I'm sorry girlie, I forgot about you. Come up."

Used to the command she jumped, clawed up his jeans and into his arms.

"Shit," he said again softly, feeling guilty. Did he have any food left for her?

He gave her a little push and she obediently moved up to his shoulder, freeing up his hands. To the left of the doorway was his kitchen, consisting of a miniature fridge and three cupboards. Two out of the three usually gaped empty. Behind the cans of beans and peaches he found one lonely can of tuna. As he dumped it into the bowl, his stomach growled. First making sure that he'd secured all four locks on the door, he opened a can of peaches and settled into the only chair. At some point that night he would have to try and exchange some of the cans for cat food. It would be a humiliating process; not something he'd had to do often. He could always call Michael. Michael knew the drill - if Sasha was calling, things were getting desperate. He would insist on buying Sasha breakfast and lunch, depending on how long the job took. Another humiliating process. He had to keep reminding himself that these humiliations were nothing compared to those he'd suffered in his last profession. To which he would never return to, no matter how desperate his situation. Not if he had to give Zarya away in the order to keep her fed.

Although he fervently hoped that it never came to that.

After he ate, he considered taking a shower. Usually, he could not wait to wash someone else's scent off; to erase them from his skin and his memory. He found himself disturbed by the insistent unwillingness to discard Troy's scent so soon. Eventually it would be gone forever, even from his memory. Why keep it any longer? What good would that do?

The chill of the apartment decided for him. Shivering, he crawled under the blankets of his pull-out bed and Zarya immediately settled on his feet, her small belly a furnace warming his toes. By the time the sun rose, he was fast asleep.

--

Troy woke up alone.

Even before he opened his eyes, he knew that the other side of the bed was empty. Sitting up slowly, he shivered. The apartment was silent and cold, clearly devoid of any other human presence. Aside from the rumpled covers and Troy's clothes scattered all over the place, the bedroom was as immaculate as it had been when the night started. There was no note on the nightstand, no forgotten sock on the floor. Just a faint scent of sex and a dull ache on one side of his neck remained to remind him that Sasha had been there.

After struggling with some effort into a pair of pants, he made his way to the bathroom. A large, purple bruise decorated the spot under his left ear. Sasha's lips had been there; he hadn't dreamt it. The bathroom was undisturbed. Unexpected sadness crept up on him. He'd expected *something*, hadn't he? A towel left in the wrong place, a few drops of water in the sink, anything at all would have been a comfort.

In the living room, he could find no sign of the shattered glass next to the window. He flipped open the trash can in the kitchen and the shards glittered at the bottom, mocking him. They were no longer a monument to that first kiss. Swept up and disposed of, they could be anything; some other glass someone else broke.

Telling himself he was being ridiculous, he turned away from the kitchen and something white caught his eye. He approached the piano slowly, afraid that it would turn out to nothing more than a crumpled up tissue, blown off course by the ceiling fans. Nestled on top of the piano sat a paper flower, each petal expertly folded, each leaf curving gracefully, missing only colors to make it alive.

He sat down on the bench and stared at it for a long time.

He was only half way across the lobby before Mary was at his side, breathless as always. His Executive Assistant was brilliant but clearly suffering from the Hyperactive Disorder. In the beginning, the rest of the crew tried brushing her off; in their defense, even Troy had had a hard time taking her seriously for the first few weeks. As a result, she'd had quite a meltdown and threw her clipboard at John's head. She'd gotten him point blank in the middle of the forehead too, all the way across the conference room. After that little incident things got better, if not necessarily more civilized. She was still prone to throwing things when she was angry.

"I got a source," she started like she always did, as if no time had passed since they saw each other last.

"She says that General Petraeus is going to resign the day after tomorrow."

She shuffled the files in her hands even though she probably had every word memorized. Troy had to speed up to keep up with her.

"Also, I've got Elisabeth Warren willing to do a ten minute interview."

"I'd rather have Chris Christie," Troy said absently, pushing the elevator button, "Is Petraeus resigning because of the investigation?"

"No. He's resigning because of the information collected during the investigation."

"Which says what?"

"I don't know. My source won't tell me."

"Any chance of getting a second source to confirm it?"

"We're working on that. Were you serious about Chris Christie?"

Her brown ponytail bobbed, her foot tapped and she was making him feel tired already, just from watching her.

"Of course I'm serious. We can even make the hurricane relief the main focus of the show. I'll run the donation numbers for an hour if he can answer a few questions."

“Like what?”

“What does it feel like to be mercilessly bashed by your own party? Does he think it’s fair to blame Romney’s loss on the hurricane?”

She scribbled on the top folder furiously even as she was shaking her head, “He’ll never go for that.”

“Well, we don’t know until we try.”

The elevator stopped and she rushed out ahead of him. By the time he made it down the hall and into the newsroom, John and Alice were already making calls. She rushed back to him, tripping over a phone cord in the process and barely catching herself from falling on her face.

“Christ, Mary! You’re gonna break your damn neck one of these days. Then what am I supposed to do?”

“Promote Alice. Are you saying you don’t want to speak with Warren?”

“Of course I wanna speak with Warren. Keith wants me to speak with Warren so I’ll speak with Warren.”

She followed him into his office. Had he been heading into the men’s room, should would have probably followed him in there too.

“You don’t have to sound so thrilled. We might be able to get you a few minutes with Tammy Baldwin.”

“You do that and I *will* be thrilled.”

“Keith wants you to spend the last fifteen minutes talking about the fiscal cliff.”

“I believe we’re calling it ‘the fiscal curb’ now.”

“Whatever. I’ll get Marty in here with the info.”

“No need. I know all about it.”

“Go over it anyway so I can tell Keith you did.”

“Anything for you.”

“Funny.”

She turned to go, then glanced at him over her shoulder, “Jamie is gonna kill you for that hickey. I don’t know how he’s gonna cover that up in time.”

Troy groaned. He’d forgotten all about Jamie. Little Jamie who’d spent the last year hinting that the two of them should go out sometime. Not the guy Troy wanted covering up his hickey before the show.

Dropping his bag on the floor and flinging his coat down after it, he hadn’t even managed to sit before Laura barged into the office.

“They’re saying out there that you’ve got - Holy Mother of God! That is one hell of a love bite!”

“Why don’t you say it a little louder,” he hissed, “I don’t think the Fox News heard you.”

She shut the door and quickly rolled down the blinds shutting them off from the rest of the newsroom.

“What are you doing?”

“Privacy.”

She perched on the chair across from him, fairly quivering with anticipation, “Tell me everything.”

“What? No!”

“Yes! Come on, you know you want to. Getting it on with a Russian bonbon? Who wouldn’t want to brag?”

“Bonbon? Really? Where do you get this shit? And he’s not Russian.”

“Ah! So you did get it on!”

Troy squeezed his eyes shut, feeling a start of a headache, “I’m not gonna talk about this.”

“You gotta give me something! Anything! Is he huge? Are you guys doing it again?”

“Ok, enough. Out you go.”

He got up and herded her to the door, “I have work to do.”

“Fine,” she seemed on the verge of sticking her tongue out at him, “but wait until Jamie sees that. You’re gonna be in big trouble.”

“Out!”

--

The day went on forever. The only bonus was that Jamie’s punishment consisted of a silent treatment among other things. He’d dabbed the concealer on Troy’s neck with more force than necessary, threw the make-up containers back on the dressing table and swore silently under his breath. Troy had stayed quiet the entire time, knowing that anything he said would be used against him. He felt vaguely guilty. Jamie was a sweet guy, charming and funny. But definitely too young; the kid was more than ten years his junior. He’d found himself wondering how old Sasha was, wishing he’d remembered to ask.

The taping took years to complete. The conference meeting held afterwards seemed to take decades off his life. Was Sasha working? The CNN building was not that far away; Troy had been there plenty of times. He had a good excuse to stop in whenever he felt like. How long had it been since he’d sat down and had a chat with Mark Lewis? Months. Years since they hung out like they used to while they both worked for CBS. He found himself excited by the idea, then had to admit that he didn’t really care how Mark was doing. It was the thought that he just might see Sasha again. Which was stupid. If the man had wanted to keep in touch, he would have left his number.

Once the conference meeting was over, Troy gathered his stuff and cut out early. The people’s obvious stares were making him irritable and jumpy. He didn’t want to be there any more, and he definitely didn’t want to go back to the empty apartment. He found Melinda downstairs in the lounge and joined her in finishing off a bottle of wine.

When they exhausted the subject of the Election, they sat in comfortable silence for a while, listening to the murmur of the surrounding conversations.

“So,” she said finally, “how did Jamie take it?”

He groaned, “Not you too! I was actually going to thank you for not bringing it up.”

“I’m not brining it up,” she said absently, taking out the pin that restrained her curls, “I swear, Rachel Maddow has got the right idea. One of these days I’m just gonna chop this entire mess off.”

She rubbed the back of her head with a sigh, “Anyway, I asked about Jamie. Not your pretty boy.”

“He’s fine. He’s giving me the silent treatment.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t throw something at you.”

“I’ve got Mary for that.”

She laughed, still rubbing her head.

“Oh, there’s Bryan.”

“How did he do at the round table?”

“Fine, once he realized I knew more about the Middle Eastern economy than he did.”

By then Bryan was already at their table, catching the very end of her sentence, “Yeah, yeah. Tooting your own horn again Foster?”

“When it’s deserved,” she said with a smirk.

He dropped into the chair between them, “I never want to do that again. So,” he turned to Troy, “I see you got some last night. How much did you have to shell out?”

In the moment it took for his words to register, Troy stared at him blankly, feeling his face beginning to tingle. Then an incredible fury filled him instantly, leaving him breathless.

He got up slowly, put on his coat and grabbed his bag. Melinda stared at him like she’d never seen him before.

Bryan looked wary, “Hey man, it was just a joke-“

“Yeah? Well, you’re a cynical, overbearing piece of shit. But don’t take it the wrong way. It’s just a joke.”

He walked out, leaving silence behind him.

--

Just past noontime, Sasha’s cellphone started to ring. Half asleep, he almost fell out of the bed trying to reach it, his sleep muddled mind insisting that Troy was calling. As he answered, he saw his breath come out in a cloud of white fog. Had he shut the heat off before lying down?

“Hello?”

“Sasha? You sound like I woke you up.”

It was only Michael. Troy couldn't call anyway, he reminded himself; Sasha hadn't left his number. The reasoning behind that decision struck him as cowardly and stupid.

Why was it so damn cold?

“Um, yeah,” he padded over to the thermostat, “I stayed up late. Celebrating.”

“So you're a liberal. I should have known.”

“I'm gay. I don't have very many choices. Did you call me to discuss politics?”

The thermostat was set on sixty as always and that only meant one thing.

“Shit,” he whispered.

“What? Someone drew a mustache on you while you were sleeping?”

“My gas has been shut off.”

“Oh.”

“It's nothing,” Sasha said quickly, “I just forgot to pay it. Been busy.”

“Right,” Michael said in a neutral tone of voice, “well, when you've taken care of that, can you come in? I've got a pile of stuff here. It'll take a few days to go through it all. I thought about bringing another person in if you have other work lined up-“

“No, no! I'm free as a bird. Leave it all to me. I'll be there in an hour.”

“Great. Listen, Maura's still out sick and Lilly is way behind. I'm gonna cut you a check when you come in to spare her having to add your payroll this late in the week.”

Sasha leaned his forehead against the thermostat, growing weak with relief.

“Thank you,” he said, “I appreciate that.”

“Yes, well,” Michael grunted, “I've got some Hebrew script here so you're gonna need your dictionary.”

“Excellent. I'll see you there.”

He took a fast, icy shower. By the time he stepped out his teeth were chattering and his lips were blue from the cold. He would try and pay the bill during his dinner break. While he was getting dressed, Zarya circled the food bowl insistently, the swish of her tail clearly saying that he best feed her something before he leaves. He bent over to scratch her behind the ears, feeling guilty again. He would stop by a store on the way home and load up on tuna and sardines, even if that meant he would be left with very little money for himself.

“I'll get some chicken too. We'll share it.”

As if she understood every word, she abandoned the food bowl and hopped back onto the bed. They had both learned a long time ago that sleep was the best medicine for hunger.

He took the bus, the balance on his farecard now dangerously low. Another thing he needed to take care of once he got paid. The list seemed to be growing by the minute.

At the CNN building he took the elevator up to the floor not many tourists saw, where file cabinets and boxes greatly outnumbered the staff. His temporary office, only slightly larger than his bathroom, boasted of one desk, one chair, a computer older than Bill Gates and two shelves built into the wall. There was no windows, for which he was grateful. It minimized distractions. A stack of manilla folders balanced precariously on the edge of the desk, a post-it from Michael stuck to the top one. 'Don't forget to eat.'

Sasha snorted and got to work.

November 8, 2012

Thursday

"Sasha, you wanna grab a bite to eat?"

Rubbing his eyes, Sasha leaned back in the chair and promptly smacked his head on one of the shelves.

Tina winced, "Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

"You didn't, I just keep forgetting the stupid thing is there. Who else is going?"

"No one," she crossed her arms and leaned against the doorway, "They're all going to Lucky's for the chicken fried steak. I was gonna head down to Sunrise Cafe. You wanna come?"

"Yeah, why not. Let me put this away and I'll meet you downstairs."

--

Ten minutes later they were sitting in a tiny booth with two steaming mugs of coffee. Tina dumped an obscene amount of sugar into her cup and added four creamers. Sasha tried not to make a face at it.

"How's school going?" he asked instead.

She shrugged, "It's going. Turns out Developmental Psychology is kind of lame. Most of these guys I'm learning about are totally fucked in the head. Like Freud. You know Freud?"

He rolled his eyes, "I did go to school you know."

She made a face at him, "Whatever, how am I supposed to know what you studied? You don't have to take psychology in most High Schools. It's not required. Anyway, this guy is a fucking weirdo."

"Yeah, penis envy and all that."

The waitress cleared her throat and Sasha blushed. He hated when they snuck up like that.

Tina grinned widely, "Hello! I don't think we're ready to order yet, but could I have some more cream?"

The woman raised her eyebrows at Tina's cup, twisted her lips slightly at the sight of Tina's face, grunted and went away. Even her graying bun seemed to disapprove.

Tina chuckled, "I think she's my favorite. No matter how many times I come in here, she always treats me like a fresh insult to the woman kind. What do you think offends her so much? The hair or the tattoos?"

Sasha was tempted to say it was the hair. For over a week now, the boyish spikes wavered between yellow and green, the combination bright enough to hurt the eyes. However, the tattoo of a naked (and surprisingly busty) fairy on the side of Tina's neck probably had something to do with it too. Dozen intricate piercings covering both ear lobes? The lip ring?

Sasha gave up, "I think it's the combination of everything."

"Excellent."

They studied the menus in silence for a while. The waitress came back with more cream and dumped it in front of them. Still grinning widely, Tina ordered the grilled cheese and tomato sandwich. Sasha couldn't help but notice how long and thin her neck seemed, almost too frail to support her head. Her collarbones looked more pronounced too, the hollows underneath them large enough to fit an egg.

Once the waitress had huffed away, he watched Tina dump another obscene amount of cream into her mug, "How long now since you've given up meat?"

"Three months and six days. And I feel a hundred times healthier."

He was tempted to tell her that she doesn't look it.

"How are you getting your protein?"

"Beans," she smirked at him, "I know what you're getting at and I don't care. I like being a vegetarian."

"I wasn't."

"You were too. 'The first men were hunters and gatherers,'" she took up a false lecturing tone, "'The human body is built to process meat and vegetables, not wheat and grain. Protein is important because, blah, blah, blah...' I know all about it. Besides, I don't think you've got any room to talk. I could probably count all of your ribs through that shirt."

"Well then, forget I said anything. How's your other job going?"

She gulped down most of the cup's contents at once, "Fine. You'd think it'd be busy right before the holidays and all, but we're almost empty. I guess people wanna party down first then check into a rehab. I had this guy come in

Friday who tested positive for benzos. His med orders got all screwed up 'cause our regular nurse is on vacation and the girl who comes in per-diem doesn't know her ass from her elbow. He had a freaking seizure and cracked his head in the shower room. Blood everywhere. Oh, thank you!" she said to the horrified looking waitress, "Can I have another cup of coffee? And more cream?"

Sasha bit his lip to stop himself from laughing.

"Anyway," she bit into her grilled cheese, squirting tomato juice onto the plate, "we had to call an ambulance and close the shower room until it was sanitized. Who knows when the guy had his last blood test? That's the worst thing about some of them, especially the junkies. You never know what they might have picked up."

The waitress came back with more coffee and cream, now giving Tina a wide berth.

"God bless the health care reform. And the student tax credit. I looked for you after the Election, where did you go?"

"Down to Kelly's."

"The Irish place? I've never gone in there. How was it?"

"Crowded. Most of the PBNC crowd was celebrating in there. Went to a party hosted by one of their news anchors afterwards."

"Oh yeah? Which one?"

"Troy Turner."

She gaped at him, not a pretty sight with the half of the sandwich still in her mouth, "You're shitting me. *The* Troy Turner who hosted the Election coverage? You went to his party?"

Sasha realized he was blushing and bent over his sandwich, "It's not a big deal."

Her sandwich landed back on the plate with a sickly splat, "Not a big deal? It's a huge deal! Troy Turner is like-- a gay God! He donates tons of money to the rehabs around here, the soup kitchens, the Family Planning; he's the one who provided the funding for the AIDS Awareness center downtown. He marched in the Gay Pride parade last year! It was all over the news. How do you not know this stuff?"

Now it was Sasha's turn to gape. Troy had done all that?

It took him a few seconds to gather his thoughts, "I only moved here six months ago Tina, how am I supposed to know all that?"

"Has it only been six months? Sometimes it seems like you've been around forever. Still, you watch TV don't you?"

"Sometimes. I watch his show but he doesn't talk about his charitable deeds."

"Well of course not," she rolled her eyes, "he's not a douche bag like some of those guys. Did you get to talk to him?"

Sasha flushed even harder, "No. Yes. A little bit."

She tilted her head at him, then her eyes widened, "Oh! My! GOD!"

"Shhhhh," he glanced around quickly, "Whatever you're thinking, don't yell it out."

She leaned forward, her eyes round as tea cups, "You didn't!"

He buried his face in his coffee cup, "I don't know what you're talking about."

“You had sex with Troy Turner,” she hissed, “You had sex with *the* Troy Turner. I can’t believe it! How did it happen?”

“Well, you see, when two consenting adults-“

“Oh shut up! You know what I’m asking. Was it like a drunk fuck or what?”

The waitress smacked the check folder on the table, her lips so tight they threatened to disappear.

Sasha watched her walk away, wondering if he dared eat here again. If she was a cat, she would have been lashing her tail in disapproval.

“It was nothing,” he said, “nobody was drunk. It just happened.”

Tina looked like she had a list of inappropriate questions lined up but she held them back with effort, “Are you gonna see him again?”

“No. Why should I?”

She frowned, “Because he’s Troy Turner, duh.”

“No, it was a one time thing.”

“Was that said?”

“No. It didn’t need to be said. We’d just met and we... you know. Whatever. Why would he wanna see me again? He doesn’t know me from Adam.”

She went back to munching on her sandwich but Sasha could feel her studying him out of the corner of her eye. He couldn’t help but wish that he hadn’t told her about it.

“Are you still seeing that tattoo guy?” he tried changing the subject.

“Pierre,” she said, “and no. He was a caveman. I think you like him.”

“Your tattoo guy? I hope I have better taste than that.”

“Don’t play dumb. You like Troy, it’s all over your face.”

“We just went over this. I don’t know the guy.”

“You’ve seen him naked, I’d say you know him better than most people. Did you exchange numbers, e-mail, anything?”

“No. I told you, it was a one time thing. Can we drop it?”

“Fine,” she said lightly but Sasha could tell she didn’t mean it.

He wanted to tell her that he regretted not leaving his number. That he did like Troy. That he’d felt a connection to the man, despite knowing almost nothing about him. But it sounded stupid even in his own head so he said nothing. Troy had probably already forgotten all about him.

November 10, 2012

Saturday

Troy stared at the ceiling. It was just past ten in the morning, the sun was out, the birds were singing and he had things to do. For one, he should be calling his father as he did every year on the Veteran's Day. Then he should be heading to the gym. After that, he definitely needed to call Mary and find out the latest on the Petraeus scandal. He told himself that some major breaking news could be happening as he lay there, but even that thought wasn't enough to get him to move.

He was tempted to call the entire Petraeus fiasco a conspiracy. A love triangle? Over two hundred saved e-mails between the head of the CIA and his two mistresses? Over the years he'd called the man many things, but stupid was never one of them. Stupid could not even begin to describe the utter lunacy of the situation. And the entire thing just conveniently happened to blow up just before the Benghazi hearing? The story stank so bad even the Fox News could smell it up on their fantasy cloud. The worst thing was, no matter how bad it stank or how ridiculous it sounded, Troy couldn't do a damn thing about it. He had no proof for any of his suspicions. It made him want to bang his head against the wall. Once upon a time he would have sunk his teeth into a story like this and shook it until the blood came pouring out. Instead, he was forced to show footage of Mistress No. 2 leaving her apartment and wonder, along with every other news anchor, if her privates were made of gold. Three times he'd shown the same woman walking down a set of stairs, as if once was not insulting enough to his profession. By the end of the taping, he was angry enough to bite.

On top of that, Jamie wasn't speaking to him, Bryan wasn't speaking to him, and wonder of all wonders, Melinda was also not speaking to him! Who would have thought *she* was going to get offended? She'd been telling Bryan to go fuck himself in various creative ways at least once a day for the last year. Now suddenly Troy was the bad guy? Because he wasn't going to put up with Bryan accusing someone of being a hooker? The world had been turned on its head.

Chris Christie had declined an interview, citing a previous engagement. Then he'd turned around and told a local newspaper that he wouldn't be caught dead on PBNC. That the Republican nominee could blame his loss on the liberal propaganda spouted by PBNC and other similar channels. As if Troy was directly responsible for the fact that the Republicans had picked a moron to represent them. Never mind that the President had given a speech Friday, demanding the House come up with the solution on the upcoming fiscal disaster, and Troy had been the only 'democrat' to point out that the House had a good reason for holding the middle-class tax breaks hostage. That one quarter hour of the show had resulted in over a dozen threatening phone calls from those same liberals he was supposedly in cahoots with. He wanted to call up Christie and ask him how that made any bloody sense at all.

He told himself this was the mark of a good news reporter. When both parties hate your guts, then you must be doing something right. Then why was he so angry and discouraged?

And lonely. What was it with the whole lonely thing? He'd never been a social butterfly and he definitely wasn't feeling this way because he was deprived of Bryan's and Melinda's scathing banter. After all, he didn't feel lonely at work; he'd been far too busy for that. No, it was the damn apartment. It had always been disgustingly large, but now it felt emptier than ever. Maybe more furniture?

Sighing, he got up and grabbed the phone. His mother answered on the second ring.

"Hey mum, it's me. How's everything? How's dad?"

Had his voice always echoed in the bedroom or was that just a symptom of whatever was eating him?

"Your father is fine. We watched your show yesterday. Did you have to show that hussy over and over again?"

He was not going to scream.

Biting his cheek, he counted to three, "I don't have as much leeway as you think. Most of the time I have to run with the stories my Producer chooses."

"Well, your Producer is not very good."

"I'll tell him you said that. Are you guys going to Florida next week?"

"Of course we are. Why? Would you like to come?"

"No, you know I can't. I have to work."

"When was the last time you had a vacation? You know, your father worked hard his entire life but still managed to take a vacation at least once a year. It's not healthy, working so much. Every time we watch your show you look tired; this last week you've had bags under your eyes. Are you coming down with something?"

That would be another one of Jamie's punishments.

"I'm fine, just busy. Is dad there?"

"He's reading the paper. There's some horrendous story in there about Jimmy Seville, something about buggering little boys. I'm sure you've heard all about it by now. I was talking to Lillian Smith last night, you remember Lillian? Her and John used to come over Saturdays and play bridge with us and the Rythers? Her son is back in town for the winter. Little Kevin? Had that godawful red hair? I have to say that Georgia has definitely agreed with him. He's grown into a fine looking young man. Only in his late twenties and already a partner in some big shot firm down there. He asked about you. Wanted to know if you're coming down for Christmas and I didn't know what to tell him. You will consider coming, won't you? We haven't seen you since the summer before last. It's not like we live across the ocean."

Troy suppressed a groan. Leave it to his mother to follow up a story about ‘buggering’ young boys with trying to set him up on a date. With Kevin Smith of all people. The kid did have the most godawful red hair when they were growing up. Wasn’t too keen on bathing either.

“I don’t know mum, I might have to do a show Christmas day. They gave me another raise.”

“That’s nice. I have yet to see that apartment you got after the last raise. And that little sports car. You could drive it down here for Christmas, it’s only an eight hour ride. Have you met anyone interesting lately?”

He got up and made his way into the living room noticing that his footsteps echoed too. Maybe some wall to wall carpeting?

“I meet a lot of interesting people. It’s a perk of the job.”

“You know that’s not what I’m asking. You’re not getting any younger dear, isn’t it about time to start thinking about settling down with some nice young man?”

Troy covered the mouthpiece and smacked his head against the wall. Then he did it again because the first time didn’t hurt enough.

“Oh, your father wants to talk to you. Do think about Christmas, won’t you? Let me know as soon as you decide to come so I can have your rooms aired out. We’ve had them closed up; Martha isn’t getting any younger either, you know, and there was no point in cleaning them if you never visit.”

“Yes mum. I’ll let you know.”

“Ok dear, here’s your father. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

He took a deep breath.

“Troy?”

“Hi dad. Happy Veteran’s Day.”

“Thank you.”

“How’s the arthritis? Is the weather bothering you?”

“It’s not bad. As long as the winter stays in the fifties I should be fine. How are things with you? Did I hear something about another raise?”

“Yeah, the Election day.”

“I watched that. You did a good job. I had people calling me up all day Wednesday to tell me how smart my son is.”

Troy felt himself blush and unthinkingly repeat the same thing he’d said to Sasha, “It was just common sense.”

“Never underestimate the value of common sense, Lord knows it has become an endangered species. I hear Suzanne Rice might be the President’s choice for the Secretary of the State, did you hear anything about that?”

“She’s definitely qualified.”

“Too bad Hilary is leaving, that woman has the balls of steel.”

“Frank!” Troy’s mother sounded reproachful somewhere in the background.

“Sorry dear,” his father said, “Troy, keep your ears open on this one. If the President’s choice does turn out to be Suzanne Rice, some scandal is bound to erupt showing her as a villain. John seems to think the Republicans will push Kerry forward.”

Troy sat down, “They want the Senate seat.”

“And they’ll get it too. Scott Brown lost in Mass by a small margin. I’d count on him winning the special election.”

“So much for our Senate majority.”

“The game’s not over yet, it’s just starting. You’ve got an audience. Inform them. Who knows, it might make a difference.”

“Thanks dad. I’ll try and light a fire under their asses.”

His dad chuckled, “Whatever makes you happy. You know we’d both like to see you for Christmas, right? But we understand if you’re busy.”

“Thanks dad, I’ll do my best to make it down there.”

“Excellent. Well, I gotta let you go. Your mother signed us up for dancing lessons. Luckily, I’m too old to be embarrassed.”

“Have fun.”

“Oh, I plan on it. I’ll never be too old to laugh at the rest of them geezers.”

After he hung up, Troy wondered what his mother would think of Sasha. What would she say if he brought Sasha home for Christmas.

He shook his head, laughing at the notion. No wonder he was single; after a one night stand he’s already planing to introduce the guy to his parents. This is what comes of being alone and celibate for over a year, an insane tendency to latch on to any person crazy enough to sleep with him.

Still, he couldn’t help but picture Sasha in his mother’s dining room, among the silver and mahogany, with that monstrosity of a chandelier above him. The one room where Troy had felt the most out of place while growing up. Sasha, with his aristocratic cheekbones and graceful bearing would fit right in. Suddenly, Troy was certain of it in a way he was rarely certain about anything. His mother would love him. She wouldn’t waste a moment showing him off to Lillian Smith and all the other chatty bats, making sure they knew what a fine catch her son had brought home.

He could just hear her satisfied tone of voice, ‘He speaks six languages, you know. And plays the piano!’

He had to stop thinking about Sasha. The man was gone, never to be seen again. His temporary assignment might already be over and he could be half-way across the world. After all, what did Troy really know about him? Sasha could have a lover in some other city, some other state. He could be married. To a woman! With a passel of children and a cute little house somewhere in Iowa. Maybe Troy *would* go home for Christmas. Just because the years have

done nothing for him, it doesn't mean that Kevin couldn't have developed a fondness for hot water. Anything was possible.

He would go home for Christmas and he would do something about the damn apartment. And he would feel better.

--

"Don't be afraid little one. I'm not hurting you, am I?"

The robe hugged his ankles, the only cover left to him. His hair, still damp from the shower, lay heavy against his neck. The faint glow of moonlight threw intricate patterns on the wood floors which should have been comforting. If he could just concentrate on the patterns and nothing else, maybe the terror would abate. Maybe then he would not feel the hands gliding down his spine, traveling over his stomach. His heart beat sounded loud in his own ears, a hollow beat of army boots striking the pavement. No, he would not think of that either. That would only make it worse. He would focus on the moonlight coming from the window. How many times had he fallen asleep while watching it? It had been his happy place for the last three years. Why wasn't it working?

Hot breath bathed his neck, the scent of tobacco turning his stomach. His dad had smoked. He used to love that smell. One hand closed over sensitive skin and he flinched violently, every muscle tense, ready for flight. But he couldn't run. There was nowhere to go.

"Shhhh little one... relax."

He could not relax, not like this. Not with that hand pulling on him insistently, not with that moist breath coating his cheek. An arm wrapped around his waist and a belt scraped the tender skin of his lower back. He bit his cheek to stop himself from crying. It was not happening, it would all turn out to be a bad dream. He had to concentrate on the patterns.

The floor was so cold.

Did he deserve this for still being alive? Was this to be his punishment?

The breathing next to his ear sped up, the belt scraping, the bulge underneath it pressing against him. He would not think about what was coming. He would not think about death.

"You're so pretty, you know that? So fucking pretty."

Tears spilled over. His body was betraying him, it was responding to the hand even as bile crept up his throat. He was going to throw up. The moonlight had betrayed him too. He could not even see it through the tears. God, let it be over soon. Whatever was coming, let it be over.

Both hands suddenly withdrew and he fought back the sob of relief. Then he heard the telltale sound of a buckle being undone, the zipper going down. He jerked away blindly and the hands grabbed him again, thrust him aside.

His feet tangled.

He hit the cold floor with a cry, his arm trapped underneath him, his shoulder instantly numb from the impact. A body landed on his own. Sweat and smoke, furnace hot.

"I told you not to do that."

The ice in that tone threatened to freeze his spine. No. He didn't want this. He wouldn't do this. It had to stop.

He struggled, he flailed and swore, fingers slipping on the moonlit floor. A knee showed its way between his, then another, spreading him open. A hand pressed down on the side of his head, pressing his cheek against the cold.

He struggled frantically now, trying to dig his nails into the wood, trying to find any traction at all.

Something hard and hot tore through him and the world exploded in pain. He screamed.

Sasha was lying on the floor with his cheek pressed against the carpet, for a split second still sure that he could feel a weight on top of him. He scrambled up breathlessly, his heart beating like wild, the blanket tangled around his legs. Frantic, he tried to untangle himself from it and almost fell again. His nose was clogged, his face damp, the scream he never actually let out still lodged in his throat. He barely made it to the bathroom before the last night's diner vacated his stomach in a rush. He dry heaved until the lights exploded in front of his eyes, until his throat was scraped raw. Afterwards he slipped to the bathroom floor, pulling a towel down to place under his head. If he pressed his face against anything cold right now he would go mad. His stomach still roiled. He felt an urge to scream into the towel until he had no voice. Instead he concentrated on his breathing. In and out slowly; a fast count of ten on the inhale, a fast count of ten in the exhale, then repeat. Time passed. Slowly, he stopped shivering, his heart beat grew more measured, his stomach grudgingly settled.

When he finally sat up, the sun had moved over the apartment floor. Zarya waited in the doorway to the bathroom, watching him carefully like some tiny statue. When he settled against the wall, she came in and rubbed her nose on his ankle. His head throbbed. He would kill for a glass of water but he wasn't sure that he could stand up yet.

Why? He was past all that, wasn't he? And why that one, the worst one of all? He hadn't thought of it in twelve years. He didn't need a reminder of what he'd been running from. He didn't need a reminder of why he'd never dared stay in one place longer than a few months. Had he been in this city too long? Grown too close to his job, Michael, Tina, countless of others? If this was his subconsciousness warning him that it was time to move on then he definitely got the message.

Still, that had been the worst. He'd though himself over it. After all, eventually he had learned not to struggle, hadn't he? Not only that, but he'd learned how to please. To survive, he'd become an actor worthy of the Oscars, so good that this skill alone had fed him for years after he ran.

He got up slowly, holding on to the towel rack. Zarya gave him a skeptical look, as if asking if he was sure that he was ready to join the upright world.

"I'm ok girly, don't worry."

She walked out with a flick of her tail, letting him know he was being ridiculous.

Maybe he was.

He was so sick of running. He liked his job, and Tina and Michael, Sonny, Ray, Aulay and Una, even his landlord. He liked this city where history was made right under his nose, where the population exceeded that of most states he'd lived in. If there was ever a place where he could be more easily hidden, he'd never found it. Some days he could even believe the story he'd told over and over again, would find himself actually mourning his poor aunt who'd raised him out in North Carolina, and then conveniently died when he was eighteen. Even though his aunt had never set foot in United States and was alive and healthy back home. More and more often he found himself crossing the familiar streets of this city without a care, without once checking to see if someone was following. When was the last time he ran because he was sure that Dom was close? Not since he'd left Nevada five years ago. Not since he'd decided that he would only do honest work from then on, even if he starved to death. And he'd come close, more times than he wanted to remember.

A part of him insisted that ten years was quite long enough. That Dom had forgotten about him ages ago. That he deserved this peace and quiet, the job he actually liked, the friends he could talk to. He liked that somewhere in this city there was a man who looked at Sasha in the way that no one else ever had. A man who still blushed like a boy.

'He wouldn't look at you the same way if he knew the truth,' a small voice in the back of his head insisted, but Sasha had no trouble hushing it up. Troy didn't need to know. He had a feeling that if it ever came to that, to having to tell Troy the truth, Troy would understand. Understand and not care. Why not take a chance?

What did he really have to lose?

November 11, 2012

Sunday

“Sasha! Whaur hae ye bin laddie? Ah huvnae seen ye in tois weeks.”

“Here and there and everywhere. How’s the business?”

The store looked clean as always. Aulay, not so much. His muddy boots had left tracks on the wooden floor and quite a few stains decorated his sweatshirt. His hair stuck out in a hundred different directions, despite the courageous efforts of his cap to keep it contained. He was never what one would call a tidy man, but today he looked downright filthy. Sitting on a stool among well dressed mannequins, he resembled some homeless guy who might have wandered in by a mistake.

“Did you work this morning?”

“Och aye, planted some trees doon at th’big park. Whit abit ye? Did ye donner haur?”

Sasha had indeed walked. There was plenty of cash on his farecard as of yesterday but that was no reason to be wasteful. Who knew when the next paycheck would come? It could be days, weeks, or even months. The five twenty dollar bills he’d tucked in his jacket pocket by rights belonged in a savings account. But he didn’t have one. What he did have was a plan.

“Of course I walked, how else would I get here? Does Una know you’re dirtying her floors?”

“at hen loves tae clean mair than she loves bunsens. She willnae gie radge.”

“Wanna bet?”

Aulay laughed, “Nae. Ne’er bit oan whit a hen micht dae coz yoo’ll aye lose.”

“Fair enough. Where is she?”

“She ran upstairs tae check oan th’oven. If yoo’re gonna bide fur’er, ah’ll gang tak’a shower.”

“Go right ahead, I’ll wait.”

“Cheers laddie. Come back suin noo, dornt be a stranger.”

When he was alone in the store, Sasha poked around. Una had stocked up on suits and jackets in the last two weeks but nothing caught his attention the way he’d hoped. He had to admit that he really had no clue what he was looking for. But that was quite alright. She would know.

He heard her coming down the stairs and planted his feet firmly on the ground. Just in time too because in the next moment, he had two hundred pounds of a sturdy Irish woman hugging him hard enough to crack his ribs.

“Oi tart de auld fecker wus pullin’ me chain! Let me luk at yer love,” she held him at an arm’s length for a moment and frowned, “Yer not eatin’ enoof.”

He grinned, “And get fat like Aulay? No thank you.”

“Ah heard ‘at!” came a shout from the upstairs hallway.

Without missing a beat, Una hollered right back, “Shut yer bake, yer Scotch ‘eathen!”

“Bludy papist coo!”

She smiled, “De day is not complete if yer man doesn't call me wan tin' or anoter. Nigh waaat can oi chucker for yer dear.”

Sasha took a deep breath and decided to lay his cards down.

“I met someone last week. I’m gonna see him again in a couple of days and I need to look good.”

“Yer luk gran' al' de time. What's so speshal aboyt dis fella?”

“I really like him.”

“Den take yer duds aff den a tie a red bow raun yisser greg.”

Even as he chuckled, Sasha couldn’t help but picture it. Showing up on Troy’s doorstep dressed in nothing but a big red bow. He supposed he’d done crazier things, but not for a long time. And hopefully never again.

“He’s famous Una. And rich. I don’t want him to know that I’m... you know.”

“Waaat? Stoney broke?”

“I just want him to like me.”

She smiled at him and shook her head, “Ah 'oney, if 'e's any use, 'e'll loike yer stoney broke. Yer nu dat roi?”

“Of course I do, but I still don’t wanna look like a cadger, do I?”

“Naw, oi guess not. Well, let's clap waaat oi ‘av.”

--

He walked out of the shop an hour later with a shirt, a jacket and a plate of Una’s famous biscuits. He left her cleaning the mud off the floor and swearing like a sailor. It turned out Aulay had been right not to take that bet.

He’d stumbled into her store his second week in the city and she’d adopted him that same day. Told him flat out that she rarely ever had a chance to dress up someone so pretty. It took Aulay a little longer to warm up to him but once he’d found out that Sasha knew his soccer, the friendship was a done deal. Sasha adored them both.

The very first time he'd heard them argue, he'd left the store assured that no marriage could stand so much venom. It had been a blow out to top all blow outs. Two days later he'd gone by there again, expecting to hear that Aulay had either been kicked out or that one of them had killed the other. Instead, everything was back to normal, as if Una had never tried to hit Aulay over the head with a shoe rack. Sasha had been determined not to ask about it either, but Una had seen right through him.

"Aye, we scrap. I'd never met a Scott 'til yer man came along. Learned quickly why me ma warned me against dem. But yer canny peck who yer love, can yer? Oi nu yer man didn't want sum bleedin papist coy for a struggle an' strife so oi guess de joke is on both av us."

That one phrase he never forgot, 'But we can't pick who we love, can we?' She'd made it sound as if life would have been much easier if love was something like an arrow, something you can aim and release at an acceptable target. He hoped he never felt like that. He still believed that there was a little bit of magic left in the world, even if it turned out that he was not deserving of it.

--

Back in his apartment, he laid out the shirt and the jacket on his bed. Una knew her stuff. For this occasion she had shared the goods from her hidden stash, the clothes she only brought out when she could smell the money on the customer. An Armani mandarin collar shirt made from cupro and a cotton Demeulemeester jacket in the same style. About a thousand dollars in retail value, sold to Sasha for sixty. He'd tried giving her more but she waved him off. "Oi'm glad yer foun' someone speshal. Oi 'ope 'e's worthy av yer."

Sasha didn't have the heart to tell her that he was the unworthy one, pretending to be something he wasn't, lying to everyone, even her. Why hadn't he ever told Una the truth? She, at least, would have never judged him. Had lying and pretending really become something as easy as breathing? At least he hadn't lied about this. He really had met someone special, even if it had taken him some soul searching to realize it.

Zarya climbed onto the bed and sniffed the clothes.

"What do you think girly? You think I'm reaching for the moon?"

She sat down and tipped his head at him as if to say, 'Really? This is what you're wearing?'

He sighed, "Everyone's a critic."

--

Troy started the day by crawling out of the bed nice and early, hitting the gym, then catching up on work. Afterwards, he dug through his closets and made up two bags of clothes to bring to the Red Cross. He finally

alphabetized all of the books, making a mental note to purchase yet another bookcase. He'd noticed quite a few titles were missing. Did he still have books in the storage? If so, they'd been there since he moved from Boston. He vaguely remembered some other stuff that was still in storage. His guitar which he'd never really learned to play well enough to not feel embarrassed, a few enormous, framed posters of the Clash, his old reading lamp, knick knacks from the time he wasn't in the public eye every day of the week. The apartment was certainly large enough that he didn't have to keep paying for a storage space. Still, when he'd moved into this monstrosity, he'd never even considered bringing the things from the storage with him. Because they didn't belong here. They belonged to the guy who still believed that he had the balls to become a field reporter. They belonged to Troy who could eat hot dogs on the street corner and not have people read about it the next day. Some part of him had believed that in this new life he was leading, there was simply no space for the boxes of the unfinished stories he'd spent years writing, or the childhood photos of a fat little boy, or the assortment of Stephen King novels.

He sat down next a bookcase and looked around again, wondering if that was the reason he still didn't feel at home here. Would carpeting and more furniture make a bit of a difference? Or did he just not belong?

His thoughts turned to Sasha again. Sasha sitting between Laura and Janice, a glass of wine in his hand, his pose easy and relaxed. Sasha playing the piano, Sasha leaning against the window frame, starrng out over the rooftops. Troy doubted that a place existed in the world where Sasha would feel like he didn't belong. The man had been so easy, so confident, conversing easily with strangers, making Troy's apartment his stage and then ruling every corner of it.

Tray couldn't even rule the space of his own bedroom. And he really had to stop thinking about Sasha. The whole thing was getting ridiculous. He would go out, buy another bookcase and a throw rug for the bedroom. If the damn place still echoed, he'd pad the fucking ceiling.

November 13, 2012

Tuesday

"Oh, Mr. Turner! Before you go, there's an envelope here for you."

Troy backtracked to the front desk, more than slightly irritated. It was just past nine in the evening and he'd been wearing the same suit for close to twelve hours. The latest news had been more of the same. Now General John Allen was also under the investigation for having an 'inappropriate relationship' with Petraeus' Mistress No. 2. Never mind the fiscal cliff, never mind the rumors that the President might appoint Kerry as his Secretary of Defense, what really matters is some 'hussy' who managed to sleep with two Generals. Troy was starting to feel like he was hosting a daytime talk show.

The receptionist held out a small white envelope and Troy snatched it out of her hand. His name was handwritten on the front in a graceful cursive script.

“Where did this come from?”

“It was in your mailbox.”

“Obviously,” he said, trying not to grind his teeth, “but where did it come from? There’s no postage. Someone must have hand delivered it.”

“I’m sorry, I have no idea. It was here when I came in at three. Tammy didn’t say anything about it.”

Inside of the envelope was a small white card with only two lines written on the front,

“उसी जगह
उसी समय”

He studied it for a few moments then showed it to her, “What does this look like to you?”

She looked lost, “Um... Hebrew?”

Why did he even bother asking?

“Have you ever even seen Hebrew script?”

Her back straightened, “I’m a receptionist. Not a linguist. If you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.”

But Troy had stopped listening. It couldn’t be. Could it?

Snatching his bag back up, he rushed to the elevator then channeled Mary all the way to the tenth floor. No wonder she twitched the entire time! He could scale the building in the less time than it took for the dumb thing to grind its way up ten floors.

Who was still in the building? Who to ask? He’d seen script like this before but of course, now that it mattered, he couldn’t remember where. It might have been during his short lived interest in the history of India. He’d taken those classes more than a decade ago and had managed to forget most of the things he’d actually learned, but he was pretty sure that the script was native to India. Maybe.

He entered the newsroom at half-run, banging his elbow on the door and cursing up a storm. Five surprised faces looked up at him.

“What’s the first language of India?”

They all glanced at each other slowly, then Danny spoke up, “Hindi?”

“Do you know any of it?”

Danny seemed alarmed by the question, “Do I know Hindi? No. I know what it’s supposed to look like. Sort of.”

Troy thrust the card at him.

“It looks like Hindi. Do you want me to check?”

“Yes. Please.”

Danny scanned the card into his computer and opened a translator. Troy resisted an urge to smack himself in the forehead. Why hadn't he thought of that?

"Yup, it's Hindi."

"What does it say?"

"Same place, same time.' But it's weird, I don't think this is how a native speaker would have written it. It's like whoever wrote it--"

"--was expecting the reader to have to scan it into a translator!" Troy finished for him triumphantly.

"Exactly."

Troy had two hours to get home, shower and make it to Kelly's before eleven. He couldn't help but grin like an idiot,

"You, my friend, are getting a raise. I could kiss you!"

Danny slumped down in his seat, "That's ok. A raise will do."

--

Sasha sat at the bar, nursing his second glass of wine. It was exactly eleven o'clock and he was starting to wish that he hadn't showed up early because with every passing minute he grew more discouraged. So far, he'd managed to pack quite a bit of discouragement into an hour and five minutes. He tried to tell himself that it didn't matter. He hadn't really expected Troy to show up.

The man could still be at work. That Petraeus thing seemed to have all the news channels buzzing with millions of crazy rumors. Or, Troy never got the note. Or he got it and never bothered to put two and two together. Sasha wanted to kick himself for it. He'd picked Hindi solely for the beauty of the script and to arise Troy's curiosity. But he had to admit that the chances were in favor of the note having ended up in a trash can.

Even if Troy got the note, went through the trouble of having it translated, who's to say he wanted to see Sasha again? That was the worst part. The possibility that everything went exactly the way Sasha planned and Troy decided not to come. Because Troy was just not interested.

Someone settled on the stool next to him. Sasha glanced over and suppressed a groan. The same guy who'd been staring at him all night like Sasha was a piece of bloody steak.

"Hello," the guy said, sounding a little winded.

And no wonder. He looked like a prime candidate for a heart attack.

"Hello," Sasha said shortly, avoiding eye contact.

"I'm Tim."

"Good for you."

"Can I buy you a drink?"

Sasha's hand tightened around his wine glass. The message couldn't be any clearer, could it? Never mind you name, how about I buy you a drink and you suck me off in the back alley. When he was younger, he'd spent hours staring at his own face in the mirror, trying to pin point that one thing that attracted all the douche bags. That one thing that made him look like he was for sale. He'd never found it.

"I'm waiting for someone," he said coldly, hoping the guy would get the hint.

"You've been waiting a long time. How about I buy you a drink and we wait together?"

"No thank you," he felt his face growing tight.

Of course Troy wasn't coming. Sasha supposed he should feel grateful the man took him home instead of the back alley.

Tim leaned in closer, bathing Sasha in the scent of stale beer, "I'm working on the new skyscraper for J.P. Morgan. Getting paid in buckets of cash right now. We could have a really good time."

Feeling slightly nauseous, Sasha decided he'd had enough. He stood up to leave and a hand closed around his wrist.

"What's your rush?" Tim grinned.

God, he didn't want to get into a bar fight. Not tonight. If the fucker did not release him-

"Sasha?"

His heart skipped a beat. He twisted his wrist out of the man's grip and took a step back, wondering why he suddenly felt like he'd been caught doing something dirty. He turned around and there stood Troy, an expression on his face resembling a frozen mask. This was a new Troy, one Sasha had not seen before.

Troy was looking at Tim, even as he stepped closer to Sasha,

"Is there a problem?"

Sleazy Tim probably outweighed Troy by at least fifty pounds but something in his pose shifted from confident to wary, "No, there's no problem. We were just talking."

"He offered to show me a good time," Sasha said, "and seems incapable of understanding what 'no' means."

As soon as he said it, he felt stupid. He didn't need to justify himself. He hadn't done anything wrong. Still, the whole incident made him feel filthy to the point that he was afraid Troy could see it when he looked at him.

Troy shifted to stand in front of Sasha, partially blocking him from Tim's view.

"Apologize," Troy said softly, and even though he couldn't see his face, Sasha could hear the fury in his voice. Hair stood up on the back of his neck. He would have never thought Troy capable of sounding like that.

'Don't do this,' he wanted to say, 'only six years ago I would have taken that fat fuck on and rocked his world. My virtue isn't worth defending.' But he couldn't. He'd started the evening determined that he wouldn't lie to Troy; only

now he truly understood that he could never risk telling him the truth. Not if it meant seeing that frozen mask, that anger turned his way. Somewhere, God was laughing his ass off.

He gently put his hand on Troy's arm, "It's ok Troy. Let's just go."

"We'll go. As soon as he apologizes."

A drop of sweat rolled down Tim's forehead and cheek. He didn't bother wiping it away.

He seemed to be weighing his options for a few moments, then he looked at Sasha, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by it."

That was a load of crap but Sasha didn't care, "Fine. Great. Troy? Can we go now? Please?"

Troy hesitated, then turned away. They left the bar in silence.

--

They sat in the car for a while, neither one of them speaking. Sasha's stomach was knotted tight, his hands cold and sweaty. What did Troy think? Was he reconsidering? Regretting he'd come? The magic must be broken. Surely, Troy could now see him the same way Tim did. He felt so stupid for thinking that just for one night, he could be some other Sasha. That he could forget the fact that men like sleazy Tim were all he'd ever known. He'd actually considered telling Troy the truth? The idea now struck him as ridiculous. What did he think was going to happen? That Troy was going to be fine with Sasha having been a hooker most of his life? Not some high priced escort either; Timmy in there would have been Sasha's catch of the week.

"I'm sorry," Troy said, "that was... uncalled for. I had no right to-- to act like some-- possessive psycho. God. Why is it that I can't form coherent sentences around you? I was out of line. I didn't mean to imply that you can't speak for yourself, or that you needed protecting or that I had any right to--" and he waved his hand around as if he ran out of words.

Sasha found that his mouth had dropped open and closed it quickly. He felt a surge of affection for Troy so powerful that it left him breathless.

Troy turned to him, his face flushed, his voice unsteady, "I saw him grab you and I wanted to kill him. Crazy, huh?" Unable to find his voice, Sasha shook his head. He wanted to say that it wasn't crazy, not in the way Troy had meant it.

"If, um, if you've changed your mind about- this, we don't have to- "

Without letting him finish, Sasha leaned in and kissed him lightly, just a brush of lips. The look on the man's face as Sasha pulled away was priceless.

Troy cleared his throat, his face still flushed, his mouth curving slightly, revealing a silly grin, “Ok, um, then... dinner? Are you hungry?”

--

The restaurant was small but clean. Sasha was an instant hit. Troy watched him chatting comfortably with the waitress in an incomprehensible tongue, laughing at something she said, ordering for both of them. He seemed more at ease now, in his own element. As a result, he shone.

When Troy was twelve, his mother had dragged him kicking and screaming to the Boston Opera House to watch a famous ballet crew perform the Swan Lake. He’d planned to run away as soon as the lights dimmed. Instead he’d sat there, enraptured for two hours, unable to tear his gaze away. It had been like watching magic unfold; the supernatural precision of every move, every glide, occasionally interrupted by a burst of beauty so powerful that his heart would beat faster, his face tingle, his soul ache. Nothing had ever affected him so much since then. Except for now. Watching Sasha laugh, bite his lip as he studied the menu, tuck his hair behind his ear, he found himself breathless, as if another piece of magic was given to him.

The waitress, a tiny little thing with a pretty smile, motioned towards Troy a few times while she was speaking.

Sasha said something that made her giggle and she went away.

Feeling self conscious, Troy had to ask, “What did you tell her?”

“That you’ve beaten her to the punch.”

“Oh,” Troy didn’t know what to say.

Sasha’s smile slipped, “Should I not say stuff like that? I wasn’t thinking really. If you don’t want people to know-“

“No, no. I mean, yes. I don’t care who knows. It’ll probably be in the tomorrow’s paper anyway. God knows it’s been long enough since my last date for this to be considered news.”

Sasha chuckled, the sound of it vibrating deep inside of Troy’s stomach.

“How many languages do you speak?”

“Fluently? Five, including my own. The rest is just bits and pieces. I used to work in a Thai restaurant, in the kitchen; that’s where I picked up some of their language. As for the rest... “ he grinned, “I guess I’m a bit of a magpie.”

“Have you ever thought about working for the Government?”

Sasha shrugged, “I don’t know how useful I would be. The languages I’m fluent in are relatively common. In everything else, I’m pretty limited. Take Arabic for example, the one language that never has enough translators. I could probably make myself understood, but ask me to read it or write it? I’d have better luck with Japanese.”

“What about Hindi?”

“Ah yes,” he smiled mischievously, “I’m afraid I know very, very little. But the script is something else, isn’t it?”

“I nearly kissed the person who translated it for me.”

“I hope she was old and fat.”

Troy laughed, “*He* was neither old nor fat, but he is my employee so I gave him a raise instead.”

The food started arriving and they were both silent while the little waitress heaped the plates onto the table.

“So, how long is your ‘temporary’ position supposed to last? Are you staying in town for a while?”

“I don’t know. I keep hoping CNN would take me on full time. I wouldn’t mind settling here, although I would miss grass and trees. Fresh air too.”

“Please, fresh air is overrated. I’m guessing you didn’t grow up in a city.”

Sasha chuckled again, “No, I grew up on a farm.”

“A farm? An actual farm?”

“A small farm, couple of acres. Cows, chickens and all that. You look surprised.”

Troy shook his head unable to picture Sasha in such a setting, “I wouldn’t have guessed it.”

“What did you expect?”

Troy spoke without thinking, “Oh, I don’t know. You stepping out of a shell in the middle of the ocean, fully formed. Like Aphrodite.”

Sasha choked on his food and covered his mouth with a napkin.

“Are you ok?” Troy asked, wondering why his filter seemed to be malfunctioning every time he was around Sasha.

Sasha nodded, wiping his mouth, “Fine. That’s a flattering picture. But unrealistic. I hate to disappoint you, but there’s nothing even remotely special about me.”

“You’re wrong,” Troy said, and damn the filter.

Sasha stared at him for a moment, seeming at a loss for words. He took a sip of his ice coffee and changed the subject, “What about you? I’m thinking you weren’t born on a farm.”

“No, I was born in Nedham, MA, with no farms in sight. My parents still live there.”

“Did you plan on becoming a reporter?”

“Ever since I was a kid. Although not like this.”

“What do you mean?”

Troy took a bite of his food to give himself time to form a response, “I was going to be a field reporter. Travel the world, report from the sites of natural disasters, war zones and all that jazz.”

“What changed?”

“It turned out I wasn’t cut out for it.”

Sasha frowned, “What do you mean?”

“I mean I couldn’t do it. I didn’t have the stomach for it.”

And there it was. One admission he'd never made, not even to his parents.

Since the cat was out of the bag, he figured he might as well lay it all out, "Remember the border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2000? No, what am I saying, you're too young to remember it. I was only twenty two and just starting my reporting career."

"I've heard about it," Sasha said carefully, his food abandoned, "You were there?"

"I was fresh out of college with glowing references from my professors and a year's worth of internship at the NY Times. They sent me in with one of their own. My first big story."

Even remembering it made him feel slightly nauseous. The whole thing had been a long, never ending nightmare where he learned just how useless he really was, how little he'd been prepared to face the harsh reality.

"What happened?"

Troy shook his head, not willing to go into details, "I just didn't have the stomach for it. Seven hundred thousand people starving. The rest of them intent on killing each other off. No sense or reason to any of it. I was there to report, nothing else. Instead I found myself trying to help and failing miserably at every turn. Almost got my friend killed. When we finally got back to US, the NY Times canned me and I gave up on field reporting."

And he really didn't want to talk about that.

Without giving Sasha a chance to form a response, he asked, "What about you? Did you plan on becoming a linguist?"

"God no. That's just something I have a knack for."

"Concert pianist?" Troy guessed.

Sasha laughed, "Not even close. I was going to be a doctor."

"What happened?"

"Besides the war? Life happened. My complete inability to grasp the basic Chemistry probably had something to do with it too."

Troy grinned, "You too? I probably flunked the same Chemistry class three times. I ended up taking Ecology just so I can graduate with enough science credits. What about the piano though? I'm surprised you don't play professionally."

Sasha reddened, "I'm not that good."

"You're better than most people I've payed to see play."

"You're sweet to say so, but I don't think that's true. Besides, the people you pay to see play have a serious advantage."

"Like what?" Troy asked, fully expecting Sasha to mention professional training, a music degree from some ridiculously expensive school, even funding; any number of things that could be easily overcome if playing the piano was something he really wanted to do.

"They can read sheet music," Sasha said, gaze focused on his plate, "I can't."

Troy paused, the chopsticks half-way to his mouth, wondering if he'd heard him correctly.

"You... can't read sheet music? That makes no sense, how do you play then?"

Sasha looked awkward, "By ear. I can usually repeat what I hear."

"You learned how to play the Turkish March by ear? By listening to it?"

Now the tips of Sasha's ears were turning red too, "That one was hard. It took a little while, and I don't think the way I play it is accurate--"

Troy burst out laughing. He just couldn't help it. Only Sasha's puzzled and somewhat guarded gaze managed to put a stop to it, otherwise he would have kept on chuckling for a long time.

"I'm sorry, I just- there's nothing remotely special about you? Is that what you said? Are you sure you don't want to rethink that?"

The slight flush in Sasha's face turned into a full blown sunset. He opened his mouth but Troy never got to find out what he was going to say because the little waitress appeared by his side. She spoke to Sasha for a few moments during which his blush disappeared and Troy was sorry to see it go. He was determined to bring it back by any means possible.

"She wanted to know if we were happy with the food."

"The food is great. I can't believe I've lived here for years and never knew this place existed."

For a few minutes they ate in silence.

"Are your parents here?" Troy finally asked, "Or back in Bosnia?"

"Neither. They're dead."

"Oh," he wished there was a wall handy so he could smack his head against it, "I'm sorry."

"It's ok, it was a long time ago."

Troy felt like an ass. Maybe he should just keep his mouth shut so his foot doesn't find its way in there again.

"My grandmother and my aunt still live there," Sasha offered, "They've been running the farm since my mother died. I get letters from them once in a while."

"Ever think about going back? To visit, I mean."

"Sometimes. I'll probably have to one day," he leaned forward, "Can I ask you a personal question?"

Troy put down his chopsticks slowly, his stomach tightening, "Of course."

"Why do you look at me like that?"

Troy frowned. Had he committed another faux pas by staring at Sasha like some deranged, deprived weirdo?

"Um... like what?"

"Like I've stepped out of a shell in the middle of the ocean. I don't understand what you see."

Now Troy was the one with heat rising in his face. It was that obvious, huh?

"People stare at you wherever you go," he said lightly, "You can't tell me that you don't see it."

Sasha shook his head, dismissing it, "It's not the same. I know what they see when they look at me. It's different with you."

Something threatened to crawl its way up Troy's vocal cords but he didn't have the slightest clue what it would turn out to be. So he bit his lip and put a stop to it.

"Never mind," Sasha said, "I didn't mind to put you on the spot."

"No, you didn't, I just- I think- " he struggled with his words for a few seconds, then blurted out, "- I love watching you. Everything you do is like-- a complicated piece of music."

Oh yes, that didn't sound psychotic at all. Had he really been wondering why he was still single?

He chuckled hysterically, "If you wanna run for the hills now, no one would blame you. Although, if you decide to go out with me again, you'll have the repeat pleasure of watching me put my foot in my mouth. In today's market, that's gotta be worth something."

Sasha didn't laugh. He looked at Troy for a few moments, a small crease in between his eyebrows.

He leaned back in his chair, "I would love to go out with you again. But if you have another French translation for me to tackle... " he tilted his head, the mischievous smile emerging again, "the night is still young."

--

In the car, on the ride back to the apartment, Troy threaded his fingers with Sasha's surprising him all over again. Every other time some man had picked up Sasha's hand in the car, it was only with the intention of dropping it in his lap. It was obvious that doing the same didn't even cross Troy's mind; every once in a while he brushed his thumb across Sasha's knuckles as if reassuring him.

Did Sasha need reassurance? God yes. Everything about this night was unreal. Was this how other people felt? This quivering, unbearably sweet feeling in the pit of the stomach? Troy's words came back to him unbidden and he felt a goofy smile tugging on the corners of his mouth, 'Everything you do is like a complicated piece of music.' A part of him was terrified of this unfamiliar feeling, of the sheer strength of it.

As if hearing his thoughts, Troy lightly squeezed his hand.

--

Troy kissed him in the elevator. Slowly, their tongues barely touching, as if he'd never kissed him before.

They paused only long enough to get inside of the apartment and close the door. Their jackets went away; Sasha didn't notice where. Troy's breath trailed across his face, his lips following the line of the jaw, tongue swiping across

the bottom lip, teeth nipping playfully at the ear. Troy's fingers rested on his neck, a touch both comforting and careful. There was unexpected sweetness to it; his warm breath on Sasha's neck somehow more personal, more intimate than the entire hurried experience of their first time together. More arousing too. Every small touch sent a shock through Sasha's spine, each as unexpected as the one before it.

This was a new, unfamiliar territory for Sasha. He was afraid to do anything to interrupt it because in this dance, he'd never learned the rules. So he stood in one spot, his spine burning, aching for the next graze of the teeth, the next swipe of the tongue, feeling powerless and revered at the same time.

When Troy took his hand, Sasha followed him without a thought.

--

Wrapped in pitch black, the bedroom did not seem so vast. By memory, Troy made his way to the small lamp in the corner. Once lit, it barely dispelled the darkness. It was enough to see Sasha waiting in the same spot where Troy had let go of his hand.

The small buttons took time and patience; Troy did not rush. With every two inches another strip of pale flesh lay exposed. When the material slid off Sasha's shoulders, Troy folded it carefully over a nearby chair. Sasha glowed under the weak light, translucently pale, eyelashes casting shadows on his cheeks.

The man exhaled slowly as Troy's hands travelled over his skin, learning every curve, every dip of the muscle. The small scar on his right shoulder, the larger one under his ribs which curved around to his back, the tattoo on the left shoulder blade, the script illegible in the shadows. Gently, Troy undid the long braid, the waterfall of sunlight slithering through his fingers. Moving it aside, he pressed his lips to the soft spot below the hairline. A small shiver ran over Sasha's skin, followed by an audible sigh.

He said nothing as Troy settled on his knees in front of him. The top button of the jeans made no sound and the zipper offered no resistance. Troy exposed the skin underneath inch by inch; the elegantly sculpted hip bone, the fragile flesh where the thigh began, legs that defied reason, long and muscled, dusted with fine blonde hair. He helped Sasha step out of the jeans and moved them aside. Then he settled back on his heels.

The man looming above him seemed knitted from mist and light. His breath grew unsteady in the silence, his arousal obvious, straining for touch. But still, there was tension there, obvious in the tremble of his hands, as if they were fighting the urge to clench into fists. In the quiver of his leg muscles. In the too smooth lines of his face, so controlled, resembling a well-practiced mask.

Troy's shirt went flying into the unknown. Taking a hold of Sasha's wrist and feeling the man's pulse flutter under his fingers, Troy pulled him towards the bed.

"Lie down," he prompted, "on your stomach."

Sasha obeyed him without a word, stretching out in the middle of the bed, legs spread open just enough to invite entrance if that was what Troy wanted. The sight of it left Troy feeling lightheaded. He could see himself laid out in between those legs, entering him with one sharp thrust, hearing Sasha cry out underneath him. He gripped the corner of the nightstand hard enough to bruise his hand. It would be fast and powerful and over in moments. That's not what he wanted.

The top drawer of the nightstand got unceremoniously dumped on the corner of the bed. Among various odds and ends were the condoms and the lubricant but he didn't touch those. The bottle he wanted almost escaped his hand and rolled off; his hands were shaking again.

The scent of hyacinth enveloped them both as he worked the oil into Sasha's back with precision, his thumbs massaging each muscle, determined to kneed even the smallest bit of tension out of them. Every so often, he would let himself taste the curve of the spine, the tender skin inside the elbow, the wrist where Sasha's pulse beat against his lips. Where his mouth passed, the muscles quivered in response. He felt them relax, unwind, grow flexible and warm under his touch. With excruciating slowness, he made his way down Sasha's body, each leg an abundance of lovely, exquisite under his palms. Finally, there was only the flawless and untouched slope left, curving away from the thighs. The oil slid down the crease turning it gold. Sasha's gasp seemed to give him permission but even so, Troy explored carefully, first with his fingers then with his mouth. He took a long time before pushing his tongue past the tight ring of muscle, drowning in his scent. As if on command, Sasha whimpered, his legs sliding open, his back dipping lower.

"Please," he whispered hoarsely and Troy felt his control starting to slip.

He attacked the entrance with his tongue, digging his fingers into the smooth, white flesh of Sasha's thighs, feeling the muscles tremble with strain as Sasha lifted to his knees, his hips rocking back to meet Troy's mouth. A frantic moan echoed in the silence. Wonder of all wonders, Troy managed to grasp the bottle of lubricant without having to search for it. He ripped the top open blindly, not caring that most of it spilled somewhere past his hands. He moved back, Sasha's disappointed whimper threatening to trigger his own. A part of his mind which was still functioning screamed that when a man said 'please' and spread his legs, it was obvious what the next step should be. He ignored it.

"Turn over," he rasped, his voice so hoarse, he could barely recognize it.

Sasha did so quickly, moving closer to Troy in the process so his legs came to rest on either side of him. He had bit his lip at some point; it looked swollen and raw. With his face flushed, his hair tangled and his eyes nearly black, he

no longer looked unattainable. Shuddering, his chest rising with each harsh breath, he was very much human. Had Troy really thought him beautiful before? Lying spread open in front of Troy, vulnerable and waiting, his beauty cut like a blade.

Carefully, Troy slipped his fingers back inside of him and was awarded with another moan, Sasha's head falling back. Sliding back on the bed to give himself more space, Troy bent down and sucked the hard flesh into his mouth. Sasha's breath caught. A helpless little whine escaped his throat, his hand finding Troy's and gripping it tight enough to hurt. The smell and the taste of him, exotic and sweet at once, completely obliterated Troy's ability to form coherent thoughts. He swallowed him down with a fury he hadn't known he possessed until that moment, by now so aroused he was in pain.

"Oh, fuck," Sasha moaned, "fuck."

He started thrusting his hips up shamelessly to meet Troy's mouth, impaling himself on Troy's fingers, his moans growing urgent. Troy struggled to take him in deeper with each thrust, to adjust the slippery slide of his fingers to the rhythm of his mouth, forgetting to breathe and barely noticing it.

Suddenly, Sasha was trying to push him away, "Troy, stop! I'm gonna--"

Felling the telltale ripple along his own spine caused by nothing more but those few words, Troy trapped one of the white thighs in place and refused to move. Sasha jerked underneath him, around his fingers, inside of his mouth, a strangled cry ripping out of him. Troy shuddered with him, experiencing yet another first with Sasha, his orgasm spilling over without a single touch to initiate it. Hot liquid filled his mouth, tasting of tears and wind. He swallowed it, one quivering thigh still trapped against his cheek.

Sasha seemed to dissolve underneath him, aside from a few aftershocks, his body growing lax and pliant. His hand found Troy's again, gently tugging him up. Troy went willingly. They kissed, all the urgency gone, now leisurely worshiping each other in the quiet after the storm.

--

Troy sacrificed a pillowcase for the clean up because neither one of them was inclined to move. They stretched out across the bed, Troy's head coming down to rest on Sasha's shoulder.

After a few minutes of content silence, Troy had to ask, "The tattoo on you back? What does it say?"

"'Et je m'en vais au vent mauvais, qui m'emporte deca, delà, parçà la fenille morte.'" "

"French?"

Sasha nodded, his hand caressing Troy's shoulder, "A poem by Paul Verlaine. Well, a part of a poem."

“What does it mean?”

“ ‘And I wander in the evil wind, which carries me hither, thither, like a dead leaf I would be.’ “

“It’s kind of sad.”

Sasha’s lips brushed the top of his head, “Yeah, I suppose it is.”

Troy lifted on one elbow so he could see Sasha’s face and smirked, “It turns out I did need help with a French translation!”

Sasha let out a surprised laugh and pulled him back down.

Nestling against him, Troy inhaled deeply, ready to pronounce the mix of honeysuckle and hyacinth his new favorite scent.

“Do you prefer the French language?”

“Only for some things,” Sasha responded, “There are phrases in French that don’t translate very well into any other language.”

“Like?”

“Like ‘C’est a mourir de plaisir.’ “

“Which means?”

“Roughly translated? ‘Pleasure so great, it could kill.’ “

Troy lifted his head again, flushing in pleasure, unable to stop himself from grinning like an idiot. Sasha’s hand came up to cup the side of his face, a strange intensity burning in his eyes.

“Dai un nuovo senso alla mia vita.”

“And that was?”

“Italian. An endearment.”

He tugged Troy down again until their lips met.

The fire built even more slowly the second time, with sighs and whispers as they rocked in the darkness. There was a tranquillity in Sasha’s snugness and heat, a blessing in his lips, unlimited trust in the long legs, wrapped tightly around Troy’s waist. Joy so pure that Troy’s eyes filled with tears as they shuddered together again, quietly this time, their lips sealed against the emptiness surrounding them.

Afterwards, with Sasha’s legs still wrapped around him, a small ball of fear lodged in Troy’s chest. He was well aware that for him, none of this had ever been about sex. What if he was the only one who felt that way?

“Sasha?”

“Hm?”

“Would you stay? Tomorrow I mean. If you have- if you need to leave, would you wake me up? I’d like to drive you or at least... you know, say goodbye.”

No, that didn’t sound desperate at all, especially when it was followed by Sasha’s silence. The ball of fear grew with each moment that passed, making it hard for Troy to breathe.

“You want me to stay?” Sasha said finally, sounding faintly surprised.

“Yes,” Troy said, now wishing he didn’t bring it up, wishing he didn’t feel so small, “Unless you have other plans.”

In the dark, Sasha’s hands found his face and guided it closer. His lips pressed against Troy’s left eyelid, then the right.

“I would love to stay,” he whispered.

November 14, 2012

Wednesday

For a split second after waking up, Sasha was sure that he’d overslept, that he’d overstayed his welcome. Then all of the details from the night before came flooding back. Troy had asked him to stay.

He’d drifted off to the corner of the bed and away from Troy again, but he’d slept the night through. The sunlight streamed through the windows, transforming the tips of Troy’s hair from brown to honey. One of his hands lay stretched out, as if having searched for Sasha in the night and then given up. It was past seven in the morning, a beautiful, sunny Wednesday, exactly a week and a day from the first time they’d met. And Sasha was hopelessly, irreversibly in love with the man sleeping next to him.

There was no use denying it. If this mix of protectiveness, joy and pain was not love, then Sasha never wanted to experience the real thing. What he felt already scared the living crap out of him. An urge to run overtook him, so strong that he found himself standing next to the bed before he could think about any of it rationally. Troy slept on, his face peaceful and relaxed. Would it really bother him if Sasha left?

‘Everything you do is like a complicated piece of music,’ he’d said.

Pulling on his pants quietly, Sasha left the bedroom, unable to think straight with Troy’s peaceful profile turned his way. In the living room he saw the paper flower still sitting on top of the piano, in the exact place he’d left it. It was the last puzzle piece falling in place, a gesture that explained everything. Troy had asked him to stay. Not because Sasha was a good lay but because Troy had meant every word he’d said. Because he truly believed that Sasha was someone special.

He leaned against the wall, feeling his heart pick up speed. He wanted to be that person Troy saw; he wanted it at that moment more than he’d ever wanted anything in his life.

--

“Are you making pancakes?”

Sasha almost jumped. Between the stereo playing on low and the sizzle of bacon on the stove, he hadn't heard Troy come in to the kitchen. He turned around and grinned at the sight of him. Troy's hair looked like a lopsided crow's nest, a long wrinkle from the pillow marring his cheek.

“You look adorable.”

Troy flushed and ran his fingers through his hair quickly, the effort resulting in worse disarray than before. It was such a sweet gesture that Sasha forgot about the food. In two steps he was tangling his fingers in the messy hair, tipping Troy's face towards his own and kissing him thoroughly. Letting out a small sound of surprise, Troy did not hesitate in kissing him back, his sleep warmed body pressing against Sasha's.

Sasha would have been happy to stay like that forever, with the soft scent of Troy's dreams wrapped around him, but an insistent ring of a far away cell phone demanded Troy's attention and the pancake was clearly burning on the stove. They untangled from each other and Troy went in the search of the phone. Sasha dumped the pancake in the trash. Later he would wonder if he should have known, in that moment, that the outside world would not be denied. At the time though, all he felt was a giddy joy.

By the time Troy came back, the pancakes were done and most of the bacon had been rescued. They ate standing at the kitchen counter, occasionally smiling at each other for no reason, like two idiots.

“I'm surprised you found enough ingredients to cook anything in here,” Troy commented, wiping up the last of the maple syrup off his plate.

Sasha chuckled, “It wasn't easy. I assume you don't cook?”

“Not unless I want to burn a place down. Although, lately I've been tempted to do just that.”

Sasha looked around the apartment, not sure if he should say what he really thought about it.

“I know what you're thinking,” Troy smirked, “burning it down would be an improvement.”

Sasha couldn't help but laugh, “Is it that obvious?”

“Mhm. It's ok. I've been thinking the same thing.”

“What possessed you to move into this?”

“Move into it? You give me too much credit. I bought it.”

Sasha grimaced.

Troy dumped his plate in the sink, “A quarter million dollars for a modern trap of steel and stone. And I don't even have a damn dining table I can eat pancakes off of.”

Sasha snorted a quick laugh and was glad to hear Troy do the same.

--

When Troy walked into the lobby, Mary was already running towards him. He wondered if she twitched by the elevator until she saw his car pass into the underground garage.

“Good news! I’ve got-“

He snatched her up and attempted to turn her around the lobby in a waltz while she squealed in surprise. Despite being obviously shell shocked, she managed to shake him off.

The receptionist giggled.

“What the hell is the matter with you?” she exclaimed, “Did John Boehner get caught snorting coke?”

Troy laughed, “I don’t care if he got caught snorting coke with Suzanne Rice! The world is fucking wonderful!”

He tried to spin her around again and she danced back out of his reach, “You’re acting like a lunatic!”

“I am! I am a lunatic!” he agreed wholeheartedly, “and I’m taking Friday off.”

Her eyes grew enormous, “You can’t do that!”

“Yes I can,” he almost skipped his way to the elevator, “It’s in my new contract.”

She stepped in with him, keeping her distance and gripping her folders as if she meant to do them some serious harm.

“Be reasonable,” she went on in a tight voice, “there are important things going on this week. The Senate finally passed a cost of living adjustment for the 3.9 million veterans and survivors yesterday. It’s an increase of about \$500 a year. The auto sales are dropping at alarming rate. The Bank of America lawsuit is enormous right now, bigger than the Petraeus thing. Isn’t that what you’ve been waiting for? For something to push the stupid drama out of the way?”

“Do you know a good Real Estate agent?”

“A what?”

“A Real Estate agent. I’m not so fond of mine.”

“But,” she spluttered, “you just moved.”

“I know. I don’t like the place any more. Actually, I don’t think I ever liked it. I want a cottage. With a sun room.”

Her teeth ground painfully. She inhaled deeply and started counting under her breath.

“You’re right,” he went on, “a cottage would be too small. A town house? No pillars and all that crap, nothing fancy. But I do want a sun room. For the piano. And a large kitchen. With a dining room.”

“Mother of God,” she whispered.

“A large yard. Trees, grass, fresh air, maybe a small koi pond too.”

The elevator opened and she rushed out.

“Keith!!” he heard her shriek and grinned.

It would be a very good day.

--

Sasha sleepwalked through the day. He worked, ate, played with Zarya, and the entire time, his heart beat steadily played the same tune, repeating the previous night over and over again. Troy's hands, lips, breathless whispers in the darkness. He caught himself blushing on the bus, the street, bent over mindless translations, drifting off from conversations, staring sightlessly into space and seeing Troy kneeling in front of him, that indescribable look in his eyes. And he found himself afraid.

He'd never had this much to lose. It was all so very new, so very unstable. Whatever was happening to him, happening between him and Troy, it was all being built on quick sand. One wrong step just might ruin everything. He told himself not to think about it.

--

Troy picked him up in the late afternoon. They ate dinner in a small El Salvadorian restaurant on the 9th Street then, to Sasha's great surprise, ended up at the Velvet Lounge. It was not the sort of a place Sasha would ever imagine Troy knowing about. Yet Troy seemed perfectly at ease.

There was nothing velvet about the Velvet Lounge; it was a dive with sticky floors, disgusting bathrooms, no elbow room and cheap drinks. It had an inescapable 'party basement' feel, complete with strobe lights and sweaty drunks downstairs, a band playing upstairs and sounding like they would crash down through the ceiling at any moment. However, once the techno nightmare called 'Jumpcuts' abandoned the stage and 'The Sneaks' stepped up, the feel noticeably changed. It might have had something to do with the fact that by then, Sasha was on his third rum and coke. More likely, it had everything to do with Troy's arm locked around his waist and Troy's chin propped up on his shoulder. Sometime later, Troy pulled him out onto a small, hidden patio that no one else seemed to know about, including Sasha who had ended up at the Velvet Lounge more than once, mainly thanks to Tina.

For a while they explored the graffiti on the walls like it was an ancient script on the walls of the pyramids. Then they kissed in the dark, Troy tasting of scotch and heat, pressing Sasha against the wall with heady urgency. When a group of people stumbled onto the patio, drunk and rowdy, and a cacophony of wolf calls and whistles ensued, Sasha was struck with an uncontrollable fit of giggles. Troy, giggling right along with him, pulled him back into the bar and out into the street. They made it as far as the inside of Troy's car where Sasha was the first to struggle out of his clothes. Troy followed, and they wrestled the passenger seat down blindly, bumped knees and elbows against the dashboard, scraped their skin on the console and whacked the horn with flailing feet. Both laughed until they were

out of breath, then kissed, sweaty skin sliding against the leather. The condensation collected on the glass as Troy thrust inside of him, his forehead pressed against Sasha's, the occasional brush of his lips gentle despite the nearly bruising rhythm of his hips. They came together, Sasha's grip leaving marks on Troy's hip and ribs.

When they finally made it back to Troy's apartment it was close to one o'clock in the morning. They raided Troy's cupboards, settling on the floor with a box of Triscuits and a container of cream cheese.

"I'm moving," Troy announced out of the blue, the words sobering Sasha like a cold shower.

Moving where? Back to Boston? Home to Nedham? The moon? Did it matter?

There was the quick sand he'd been waiting for, the end he knew would come. Even so, the enormity of the shock and the pain those two words caused surprised him. He wanted to say something, something casual that would not betray how he felt. His throat had locked up though and all he managed to do was to shift slightly on the hard floor. The slight soreness from the car sex made him feel doubly betrayed.

Troy had been munching away without looking at him, but now he put the box down carefully, "Did I hurt you earlier?"

Sasha shook his head. Troy had not hurt him really, but he was going to do so now.

He cleared his throat, "Where are you moving to?"

"I don't know yet. There's a house in the Foxhall Village I want to look at sometime this week."

Sasha made an involuntary sound, his relief so great it made him lightheaded. Then he laughed at himself. So far, he'd expected Troy to let him down at every turn and Troy just kept proving him wrong. Maybe it was time to relax?

"What's funny?"

Sasha shook his head again and pounced on him.

November 15th, 2012

Thursday

Stretching out on the messy bed like a content cat, Troy watched Sasha pad around his bedroom without a stitch of clothing on.

After dropping him off at work that morning, Troy had spent the rest of the day so distracted that he'd pushed poor Mary into a burst of frustrated tears. He'd had to tape the same segment five times; apparently, grinning while talking about Romney's offensive 'gift speech' was in very poor taste. On the bright side, Melinda was speaking to him again, had even invited him to a party she was giving Saturday night and had not hesitated to invite Sasha too. Life had become an insanely bright and radiant place in the last few days. Troy finally understood what people meant when they talked about walking on clouds.

Him and Sasha spent the evening at the Blues Alley, dining on authentic Creole cuisine and enjoying a jazz duo. Afterwards, they took a walk down the Old Town, their arms linked. Sasha kissed him under a tree by the Potomac river, the moonlight bathing them in its glow.

Turning away from the bookcase, Sasha grinned at him as if reading his thoughts, "You're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Staring at me like I just stepped out of a shell."

Troy sighed, "You're gonna have to get used to it."

Shaking his head, Sasha turned back to the bookcase and pulled out a slim, dog eared volume.

He leafed through it, then blinked at Troy, "Japanese death poems? You read Japanese death poems?"

Troy blushed, "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, I just- I didn't expect it I guess," he leafed through it some more, then smiled fondly, "Tsuchi kane ya, Iki wa taete mo, Tsukihi an."

"Oh I know that one," Troy smiled too, tucking a pillow under his arms, "It's Atsujin, right? 'Earth and metal... Although my breathing ceases, Time and tide go on'."

"You know Japanese?"

"God no. The translations are in the back of the book."

Sasha chuckled and put the book back. He poked around some more, then settled back on the bed next to Troy.

"I have to admit, your reading choices are impressive. I don't think I've ever seen so many Russian authors in one place. Not in an American household anyway. No offense."

"None taken. Especially since my less impressive reading choices are not out on display."

"Really?" Sasha grinned mischievously, "What would those be? A stack of romance novels under your bed? Maybe some Harper Fox to end a long day with?"

Tracing a muscle along the white thigh, Troy frowned, "I've never heard of Harper Fox."

He was surprised to see Sasha blush slightly and instantly decided to get his hands on a Harper Fox novel. Anything that made Sasha blush had to be worthy of closer examination.

"Never mind that then," Sasha said, trapping his hand and bringing it to his lips, "Will you tell me what you're hiding?"

"Nothing sordid. Mostly Stephen King novels with some fantasy fiction thrown in. Robert Jordan, George R. R. Martin and such."

"Why hide it? There is nothing wrong with R. R. Martin. It might be fantasy but it's better written than most non fiction I've come across. I'm guessing the Game Of Thrones is your favorite?"

Wondering if the man would ever cease to surprise him, Troy laid his cheek against the warm thigh and inhaled deeply, “You guessed right. I suppose it’s pretty obvious that I’m a geek.”

Sasha’s fingers rubbed the back of his head and Troy wished he could purr.

“Nonsense,” Sasha said softly, “Martin does politics well even though it’s set in a fictional world. It seemed like something that would appeal to you, that’s all.”

“Do you wanna go to a party Saturday?”

Sasha’s fingers paused for a few moments then resumed their task, “What kind of a party?”

“Melissa’s celebrating something, I’m not sure what, but she’s invited us both.”

“Why would she invite me? We’ve only met once.”

Troy curved one hand against the satiny flesh under Sasha’s knee, “Because you’re important.”

Sasha snorted a laugh, “Really? To whom?”

“To me.”

November 17th, 2012

Saturday

Troy’s thumb brushed over his knuckles again and Sasha took a deep breath. It was just a party; he’d been to millions of parties, some fancier than others. The high rise in the Judiciary Square was clearly built to be intimidating; if money oozed down Troy’s apartment building then this one stank of it, overpowering everything else. Their footsteps had echoed across the marble lobby floors which were polished so thoroughly that Sasha could see his reflection. Bizarre, abstract art preened under skillfully arranged lights; cream orchids graced the front desk and the lobby fireplace. The carpet in the elevator alone probably cost more than everything Sasha owned.

His nerves were strung so tight his jaw was beginning to ache. He kept telling himself that this was not the first time he attended a party where he didn’t belong, that he’d always been a social chameleon, more than capable of adjusting to whatever the situation calls for. But he knew this was different. This wasn’t just some random party where he was playing an escort or a last minute date for some desperate stranger. He was attending as a part of a couple. For the first time in his life, he was not just the ‘plus one’.

“Are you ok?” Troy squeezed his hand.

Sasha attempted to smile and it felt almost painful on his face, “Yeah, I’m fine. Just... you know. Nervous I guess.”

“We don’t have to do this. I can tell her we got... sidetracked.”

Sasha had to laugh at that, “Sidetracked, huh? In what way?”

“I can think of a few different ways,” Troy whispered with a wicked little smile, bumping their shoulders together.

Feeling a powerful surge of affection again, Sasha pressed a quick kiss against the other man's temple, "It's fine. I'm fine. Maybe we can get sidetracked on the way back."

Troy laughed.

--

Melissa's apartment was not a large one. Here too, marble was the prevalent component although cream walls and dark wood somehow soothed the expanses of glass and modern lighting, resulting in a space that was contemporary without sacrificing any of the comfort. Troy had been one of the first people to visit her after she had moved in and had been there many times since. He made his way to the bar, Sasha's hand tucked under his elbow, nodding to familiar faces but keeping his distance. Despite assuring him that he was fine, Sasha radiated tension. Couple of glasses of wine would be their first order of business; everything else could wait.

Wine in hands, they made their way through to the smoky living room where most seats were occupied and even the standing space was hard to come by.

"Troy! You made it!"

Most eyes turned to them as Melissa abandoned the crowd gathered by the fireplace. Troy felt Sasha shift and placed his hand on the small of the man's back. He didn't understand why Sasha was so clearly uneasy.

"Sasha," she smiled, trapping his hand in both of hers, "I'm so glad you came. I have to steal you. Janice brought a date who is having a very hard time making himself understood. Of course, she doesn't care what he's saying because he's so delicious to look at, but I would like to be able to speak to the man and I think he must be feeling terribly out of place. He's from the Czech Republic. Your native language is somewhat similar, isn't it?"

Sasha glanced at Troy in alarm but Melissa had already tucked her arm under his and was pulling him back toward the fireplace.

"You've created quite a stir among the girls since the night of Troy's party," Troy heard her say, "I believe poor Laura was looking into trying to import herself a boy toy somewhere from Balkans."

Troy choked on his wine as shock replaced the panic on Sasha's face. Then they were sucked into the crowd, leaving Troy alone by the expanse of windows which looked over the District skyline. Twirling the glass of wine in his hands, he suddenly wondered why most TV news reporters felt the need to surround themselves with so much glass. Were they so used to being in the public eye that privacy had become unsupportable? Or was it a way to fight back the discomfort, a way of fighting fire with fire?

"Troy! I was wondering if you were coming. When did you get here?"

Before he managed to turn around, Laura had already placed a sloppy kiss on his cheek, "Did you bring the bonbon?"

Resisting the urge to wipe his face, he rolled his eyes at her, “This is getting old. He has a name.”

“I know that, I was just kidding. Is he here?”

“Yes. Melissa kidnapped him a few minutes ago.”

Laura was stretching out on her tip toes to glance over the crowd before Troy had even finished speaking.

He drained his glass, feeling slightly irritated, “What is this about you importing a boy toy from the Balkans?”

Her heels came down, “A companion. A companion from the Balkans. And it’s not called importing, thank you very much, it’s called helping out someone who has no means to enter United States on their own.”

“Mm. So for the price of ‘companionship’ they can enjoy all that US has to offer?”

Her mouth twisted, “There’s no reason to make sound so... dirty.”

“I call ‘em as I see ‘em honey.”

“Hey, there’s Keith! Keith!!”

Troy wanted to smack her. He didn’t want to talk to Keith and she was well aware of that. Lord knew his Producer had been ready to strangle him for a few days now. He fought the urge to escape into the crowd and squared his shoulders instead.

Keith did not have a drink in his hand. He wore his everyday uniform; a nondescript shirt, jeans, and a corduroy jacket with elbow patches. Paired up with his messy pony tail and square glasses, his clothes always gave him an appearance of a disgruntled professor who was exhausted and underpaid.

“Keith,” Troy said, “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

He gave Laura an obligatory hug before turning to Troy, “I didn’t expect to be here. How was your day off?”

Troy blushed. Him and Sasha had spent the day in bed. And the jacuzzi, and the kitchen floor, and the bed.

“It was lovely.”

Laura grinned but Keith’s face stayed serious, “I just met your Sasha. He’s quite remarkable.”

Troy blushed harder. It was flustering and intoxicating to hear those two words, ‘your Sasha’.

“He is,” he answered and wished he had another drink.

Maybe that could be his excuse to get away? Just as he was figuring out the best way to abandon them both, Melissa rescued him by emerging from the crowd and latching on to his sleeve.

“I need to talk to you.”

Flashing an apologetic smile that he hoped looked genuine, he let Melissa pull him away and across the room. He thought she was just looking for a quiet spot but she led him to the balcony and out into the November chill. The moment the sliding door shut off the apartment noise, he noticed that they weren’t alone.

“Now,” Melissa said quickly as if afraid of his reaction, “let’s all be adults here. Bryan wants to talk to you and I think it’s important. Could you please listen?”

Bryan leaned on the railing, a cigarette loosely held in his fingers, his posture perfectly at ease. Troy shrugged, "Sure. I'll listen."

Bryan straightened up, glanced at Melissa, then at Troy.

"I went to Reno, Nevada six years ago with my brother in law and some of his friends. It was one of those 'what happens in Reno, stays in Reno' trips. We all gambled and drank and some of us hired... escorts for the night. One of Mikey's buddies is gay; we had to go out of the way to find him a... 'companion.' I only saw the man he hired for a few minutes but his face was pretty memorable. When I saw him again I knew that I'd seen him somewhere before. I just couldn't place it. He had shorter hair back then, a few shades darker and was much thinner. Called himself Nik. But it was him. It was your Sasha."

Troy blinked at him for a few moments then burst out laughing, "You just never give up."

Bryan's shoulders tensed up, "Why would I lie about it?"

"Who knows why you do anything? Because you're bitter? Miserable? Because everything in this world that may seem perfect has to be painted over with your cynical brush?"

"Troy," Melissa said softly, "Bryan isn't lying about this. He double checked. He called his brother in law's friend and--"

"Are you fucking kidding me? How many times have we agreed that he's full of shit? Now you're suddenly taking his side?"

"Troy, honey, I just don't want you to get hurt," she tried again, her soothing voice only infuriating him more.

He wouldn't even consider it. It was ridiculous.

"It's bullshit!" he snapped, "He would have told me. Why would he lie about something like that?"

Bryan chucked his cigarette over the rail, his voice dripping with scorn, "Because he's a whore. Only now, instead of peddling himself on the streets of Reno, he's got a rich TV daddy who--"

The crunch of Troy's fist connecting with Bryan's nose was oddly satisfying. Melinda yelped. Bryan stumbled back against the railing, one hand reaching up as if to catch the splatter of blood.

Turning on his heel, Troy stormed back into the apartment blindly, the fury still strong enough to tint his vision red.

He found Sasha standing in the corner with Laura for company.

"We're leaving," he hissed, grabbing Sasha's elbow and yanking him away.

A fleeting look of fear passed over Sasha's features but he said nothing. He followed Troy out without a hesitation.

--

The walk to the car was silent.

Sasha risked a couple of glances in Troy's direction and saw the same fury that had emerged so briefly the night of their first date. And he was afraid.

Something had gone horribly wrong in there. He couldn't imagine what could make Troy so angry and he didn't dare ask. He'd never learned how to deal with anger. As a child, he used to hide when his parents argued. Later on, he used to hide from Misha. He could never hide from Dom but he did try many times; no matter how many times he failed, he still couldn't fight that basic instinct to stick his head in the sand. This was so much worse. What if Troy was angry with him?

What if these past few days he'd gotten lulled into a false sense of security? Troy had always been so gentle with him. What if that wasn't all there was to Troy? He couldn't imagine Troy intentionally hurting him, but how much did he really know about the man after a couple of weeks? His mind rebelled at such thoughts. Troy wasn't Dom; Troy wasn't like anyone Sasha had ever met or been with. Sasha knew this, he believed it with all his heart. Then why were his hands shaking? Why was the need to run still so strong?

Troy seemed content to take his fury out on the car for the time being. They peeled out of the parking garage, leaving rubber marks on the cement. Sasha fought the urge to put on his seat belt.

"I wanna ask you something," Troy said, his voice unsteady.

Sasha felt his stomach flip and faint nausea travel up his throat.

"Just tell me the truth please. It doesn't matter what it is."

"Ok."

"Did you- have you ever lived in Reno?"

Sasha's face turned numb. He was going to be sick.

Panic seized him and he said the only thing that he could under the circumstances, the only thing that would make Troy's anger go away, "No."

"I knew it!" Troy smacked his hand against the steering wheel, "That fucking piece of shit! You wouldn't believe- the nerve-- never mind. I don't wanna even think about it. I'm sorry I made you come to this thing, it was a stupid idea."

"What happened?" Sasha asked. The lying had not made his nausea go away. It seemed to only make it worse.

"Nothing. My coworkers are pieces of shit, every single one of them. Fuck them and their pretentious parties. I just wanna forget today happened."

--

Sasha couldn't sleep.

By the time they had returned to the apartment after the party, Troy's anger seemed to have completely gone away. They ordered chinese take out and talked politics late into the night. They had sex. Troy drifted off afterwards but Sasha could not keep his eyes closed.

Why had he lied?

How long could he hope to keep on pretending like this? Eventually the truth would come out. It already did; obviously, someone at that party must have recognized him. It was a small world, many people took yearly trips to Reno or Las Vegas. Hell, Sasha had crisscrossed the country so many times, he couldn't even list all the cities he'd lived in, all the streets he'd worked. This time Troy had believed him. What about the next time?

He should tell him the truth. Wake him up right now and apologize for lying. He'd had a good excuse, hadn't he? For living the way he used to? He had been on the run for so long that he could never hold down a stable job. Even if he could, the minimum wage was never enough. There was always a hidden stash he had to have, the emergency money just in case he'd had to leave the town quickly.

Troy slept peacefully, one arm flung over Sasha's chest. Sasha covered his hand with his own and wanted to cry. Wake him up, tell him he lied, explain why he'd had to take the only work which would allow him to move often, to never be tied down, to never need identification. And then what? Tell him about Dom? Relive those years, the pain and the terror? He couldn't. Troy would never understand. No one could.

What other option he he have? He could leave. Right now he could get up and leave without a word. Go home which had never been a home, pack his bag, hand Zarya over to his landlord and take the first bus out of the town. He could picture Troy's confusion when he woke up alone. The man was stubborn; he would probably turn the city upside down searching for Sasha. It would hurt him, Sasha leaving without a word, without a note. God, he didn't want to hurt the man. He would almost rather Troy found out the truth. Maybe if Troy hated him, leaving would not be nearly so hard.

There was no painless way out of this. Either way, Sasha would end up alone, losing the only thing he'd let himself care for since he was a child. He'd lost so much already that he'd learned not to want. He'd learned to expect the worst. Then Troy came along and turned his life upside down.

This loss wouldn't be like the others. He knew that. This one would destroy him.

November 18th, 2012

Sunday

“Tell me what was it like, growing up in Bosnia?”

They were intertwined on the couch, both naked and still glistening with sweat.

The question caught Sasha off guard. There was a repertoire of things he could say to nip the conversation in the bud. He'd used every single one of them over the years. He'd avoided answering that question so many times that he wasn't sure if he could do so honestly.

“I'm sorry,” Troy said carefully, “I shouldn't have asked that.”

“No. It's ok. I just- I guess I don't really know how to answer that. There's a difference between growing up there before the war and during the war. I'm not sure what you're asking.”

“Before the war. I was just curious what it was like.”

“Peaceful,” Sasha shrugged slightly, “I know that probably sounds obvious but that's how I remember it.”

Waking up to the smell of fresh bread. Padding out into the kitchen, still in his pajamas, to be handed a steaming corner of a loaf slathered in butter. In the summer, walking barefoot under the apple trees. In the winter, curling up next to the wood stove. Mama singing as she baked, her elbows dusted with flour, her voice sweet and unabashed.

He was surprised how much those memories hurt.

“It was happy,” he added.

Troy's lips brushed the top of his head, a small comfort he didn't ask for. But he was grateful for it nonetheless.

“We didn't have running water in the house until I was five,” he said to lighten the mood.

“Really?”

“Yup. My great-grandmother built the house before the Second World War. There was a pump outside. You had to lug buckets of water across the yard in order to cook or take a bath.”

“Sounds like a lot of work.”

“It was. Dad hated it. He's the one who put the plumbing in. He was all for the electric heat too but mom wouldn't hear of it. She swore by her wood stove.”

“What was she like?”

Sasha shifted to rest his head on Troy's arm and give himself time to figure out how to answer the question.

“Blonde,” he said finally, “like me. Tall and thin. Grandma was always nagging her to eat more. Pretty.”

Fearless. Proud. Fiercely protective of her home and family. Did not believe in heaven or hell, putting all of her faith in the land instead.

A woman who lived with a hand grenade in her kitchen drawer and knew how to use it. Not against an enemy, but as a last resort for her children and herself. Because she understood that in a war, choosing the way you die could be a blessing.

“So you took after her,” Troy smiled, tugging on a strand of Sasha’s hair.

It was a sweet thing to say and Sasha couldn’t help but smile back, “I guess I did.”

“Did she play the piano too?”

“No. She loved to sing though.”

Colorful scarves strewn across the fields, scythes falling in the unison, dozens of voices raising to the autumn sky.

He shivered at the memory and Troy’s arm tightened around him, “Are you cold?”

Without giving him a chance to answer, Troy reached behind him and tugged a blanket off the back of the couch, awkwardly shaking it out over both of them.

“So when did you learn to play?”

“Before the war started. I took lessons. Mom said I had good ears. Even back then I was picking stuff up. My dad’s Russian swears, bits and pieces of Romani from the gypsies, English from the movies. I learned how to play in record time but couldn’t figure out the sheet music no matter how hard I tried.”

Troy chuckled. In the short silence that followed, he traced the scar across Sasha’s ribs. Sasha found himself holding his breath and forced himself to breathe normally. So what if Troy asked about it? He could lie. He’d already lied about so many things, what was one more?

“What about your dad? What was he like?”

Sasha almost sighed in relief, “Well, he didn’t like the piano lessons. He wanted me to be more like- more like him.” He hoped Troy hadn’t noticed the slip.

“He liked to hunt,” he went on quickly, “You know, the type of guy who would shoot a deer, disembowel it in the woods then carry the carcass home on his back. He tried to show me how to skin a rabbit once. It’s didn’t end well.”

That was an understatement of the century. It was all somewhat bearable until the little paws had to get tucked in so the skin could slip off without being cut. The paws had crunched and Sasha had lost his breakfast.

“I turned out to be a pretty good shot though. By the time I started first grade I could hit a moving target at twenty feet. As long as it wasn’t alive.”

His dad grumbled how Sasha’s hands were wasted on the piano. But never in public. In public he’d brag how talented his son was. A chip off the old block.

“He liked to sing too. Usually after he’d had a few drinks in him.”

Dad was easy. He never got angry, he never yelled. He laughed at silly jokes and made friends with complete strangers. If mom had held up the world, his dad was the one who’d made it sunny.

“He died in ninety three. Up until the day he died, I think he still believed that the war would just blow over.”

“What happened?” Troy asked softly.

“He got in the way. The soldiers came to take away our next door neighbor. By then, the lines were drawn across the land and we ended up in the Serbian territory, which was fine. For the most part. Mom was Serbian anyway and dad was not a religious man. But the next door neighbor was Muslim. He should have left early on. He’d sent his wife and kids to Germany at the first sign of trouble but wouldn’t leave himself.”

“Why? Why would he stay if it wasn’t safe?”

“It’s hard to explain. Here, people move all the time. Every few years a different state, a different city. Back home we don’t do that. Generations and generations would work the same piece of land. After your ancestors sow their blood, sweat and tears into a piece of earth, it’s kind of hard to let go of it.”

Still, Sasha had been angry. Even though he understood, he’d been angry for a long time afterwards.

“My dad, he’d lived most of his life in the town but was still considered an outsider. He never really understood the deep seeded divisions in Bosnia, and how could he? Some of them stretched back to the Ottoman empire. So when they came to get Amir, dad decided to put a stop to it. The soldiers shot him and took Amir anyway.”

“Just like that?” Troy sounded shocked.

“That’s what I was told. I wasn’t there.”

Troy’s arms tightened around him.

“Things got rough after that.”

That was the second understatement of the century. The borders closed, the fear escalated, the neighbors started disappearing, Croat and Muslim alike. Army trucks filled the road; alongside the river, deep trenches furrowed the earth. The fields gaped empty; nothing was planted, nothing grew. The food became scarce. The army had to get fed first. Mama patched clothes, split wood and somehow made meals from nothing. Bread without yeast, pie without eggs or butter. The army took the chickens, then the goat, and finally the cow. Money became unimportant, just

paper fluttering in the wind. The real treasures became impossible to guard; the rabbits, the tomatoes, the apple trees.

Misha started disappearing for weeks at a time, his first foray into sneaking illegal goods across the borders. Salt, coffee, sugar, spices, whatever would bring the highest profit. Mama used to beg him to stop. She never thought the risk was worth the reward. Misha would agree to stop and then do whatever he wanted anyway. By the end of the war he was running guns. Because for Misha it had never been about the product or the reward; it was all about the rush. He was just a junkie chasing his next high.

He wasn't there when mama died. He wasn't there for the funeral and he never went to visit the grave site. Sofia was not his mother. He didn't care.

"Mom died three years later, in ninety six. She was leaving the market. Some drunk fools had decided to settle their debate by shooting at each other. A stray bullet got her in the back."

They carried her home, to the doorstep. Old Stefan who owned the market. Sneza from the pharmacy. The postman, the barber, the wife of the old town judge. Marko and Stana and Nikola. The townies, the ones who never left, the ones that had decided to stick it out until the end.

He could still hear his grandmother shrieking on the front steps, a sound he could have never imagined until he heard it. A sound sharp enough to break the world.

"Jesus," Troy whispered.

Realizing he'd shared more than he wanted to, Sasha pushed it all back.

He was relieved that his voice came out steady, "It's ok. Like I said, it was a long time ago. Now you've heard all about my family. What about yours? What are your parents like?"

"Wait," Troy shifted so he could see Sasha better, "you must have been what? Eleven in ninety six? And you moved here in ninety seven? Did you come alone? How-"

"I don't want to talk about that."

It came out cold and final and harsh. Inside, he wanted to scream.

Troy recoiled as if Sasha had slapped him.

Sasha cupped his face in shaky hands, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean for it to come out like that. I'm just- not ready to talk about that, ok? Maybe some other time."

"Okay," Troy whispered, trying to look like he wasn't hurt by it and failing.

Sasha crawled up to kiss him, to take that look away. They made love again and Sasha found himself clutching him with renewed desperation because even the illusion of safety was shattered now. The terror of losing him suddenly seemed more inevitable than ever, looming just over the horizon, an incoming storm he didn't know how to stop.

It broke the very next day.

November 19th, 2012

Monday

Sasha walked into his apartment and stopped, feeling like someone had punched him in the stomach.

Misha sat at the table, his feet propped up, his fingers stapled across his stomach. It couldn't be. It was a bad dream and Sasha would wake up any minute now with Troy's arms still wrapped around him.

"Close your mouth little brother or you might catch a fly."

It was not a dream. Jesus, it was real.

"What are you doing here?"

"Do I need a reason to visit family?"

"We're not family. How did you find me?"

Misha rolled his eyes, "Were you trying to hide? You stick out like a sore thumb."

"Why are you here?"

"I wanted to visit with my little brother."

"Spare me the bullshit," Sasha snapped with more courage than he felt, "How the fuck did you even get in here?"

"Your nice landlady let me in. Seems my absent minded brother forgot I was coming to town. She didn't doubt it for a minute. It sounds like my brother forgets things all the time. Like paying rent."

"You told her your real name? I'm surprised you remember it."

"Even better," he smirked, "I showed her my old green card. You're the one still using the your real name. Zasto govorimo Engleski? Zar ti ne nedostaje nas jezik?"

"No, I prefer English. Why are you here?"

"I need a place to stay until the end of the week."

"You mean a place to hide? No."

"I'm flying out Friday morning. We could catch up in the meantime."

Sasha laughed bitterly, "Catch up? On what? Did you get promoted from being the Afghani drug mule?"

Misha slid his legs off the table, the chair slamming down with a thump.

“What about you, little one? Does Strattino know where you are?”

“Don’t call me that,” Sasha said numbly, feeling his hands begin to sweat.

Misha looked around the apartment, grimacing in contempt, “You must be selling yourself for peanuts.”

Sasha kept his voice steady with effort, “I’m done with all that. I left Strattino years ago.”

“Done? You’ll never be done little brother. It’s the only thing you were ever good at.”

“You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know you’re full of shit,” Misha leaned his elbows on the table, a gesture so much like their father’s that Sasha closed his eyes to shut it out, “Left Strattino? The word on the street is you ran. Stole his money too. Did you know he swore to peel a strip off your hide for every thousand you took?”

Sasha clenched his fists, “That was my fucking money. I earned it. What the fuck would you know about it anyway? You left me there.”

“Damn right,” Misha leaned back in his chair, the look in his face clearly saying that Sasha was being dense, “You were safe. You had everything; food, clothes, a roof over your head. Would’ve had it all today too if you hadn’t acted out like a spoiled brat.”

“I was fucking fifteen!” Sasha exploded, “If I had it so good why didn’t you take my goddamned place? You fucking sold me and took off!”

Misha shrugged and smiled, “I didn’t have your skills.”

“Get out.”

“Make me.”

“I’m calling the cops.”

“You do that little brother and you’ll regret it. I have a funny feeling no one here knows who you are. Or that your green card is fake. Does your boss at CNN know?”

Sasha felt his whole body turn numb, “Michael wouldn’t care.”

“No? Are you sure? What about the cops, you think they would care? The FBI? Strattino is still on their wanted list, isn’t he? What about the immigration? You think they won’t care?”

Sasha stood frozen in one spot, watching his whole world fall apart.

“Good boy,” Misha grunted, “Now, for some house rules. Not a word to anyone. I’ll need you to run some errands during the week but otherwise you need to stay put.”

“I have a job,” Sasha rebelled, wishing like he didn’t sound like he was whining.

“Call in sick. I have money. You need to go to the store too ‘cause I can’t live on that shit in your cupboard.”

“I have- I have other work. I can’t just cancel-“

Misha burst out laughing, “That’s what you’re calling it now? ‘Other work?’ What happened to ‘I do’t do that any more,’ huh?”

Sasha ground his teeth. He wanted to contradict him but if there was a chance of being able to see Troy this week then he had to take it.

“Fine. You’re right. I have a customer.”

“Cancel.”

“I can’t. He’s- he can be overbearing. If I cancel he might show up here. If he sees you he’ll flip out.”

Misha studied him for a long time, then shrugged, “Ok, you can see your guy. Once this week. And he better pay you enough to make this worth the risk.”

Sasha turned away, “I’m going for a walk. I need to make some sick calls.”

“You better not play me little brother.”

“I agreed to everything,” Sasha said tiredly, “I’ll lie more easily in private. Five minutes.”

“Five minutes.”

--

Troy answered on the first ring, “Hey! Miss me already?”

Sasha had to laugh even though he felt like crying.

“Actually, I do.”

“Yeah?” Troy sounded surprised and pleased, “I’m not at work yet, I can still call in sick.”

“No, no, don’t do that, I just- I have some bad news.”

“Are you ok?”

Sasha stopped and leaned against the building wall, squeezing his eyes shut. He wasn’t ok. At all.

“I’m fine but something came up. At work. I’m gonna be tied up for a few days.”

“Oh.”

“Just four days,” Sasha added quickly, “By Thursday it should be all settled. So... unless you have Thanksgiving plans, I would really, really like to see you.”

“Really, really?” Sasha could hear him smile.

“Yes. Really, really.”

“Well, I think I’ll take Thursday off then. Call me when you’re free?”

“I will.”

They said their goodbyes and Sasha hung up. Four days. He would get to see Troy at least one more time. Once Misha was gone, Sasha would stick around long enough to pack. Then he would head upstate New York to try and cross into Canada. It was over. He’d known it wasn’t going to last; that he’d built something on air and would eventually be forced to watch it crumble. But he’d never, ever expected it to hurt this much.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, he called Aulay.

--

He returned to the apartment to find Misha eating a second can of sardines. Zarya sat on the fridge, giving Misha a dirty look.

"Those are for Zarya," Sasha snapped, getting angry all over again.

"The orange viper over there? She almost took my eye out over the first can. She's lucky I didn't make her into a pair of gloves."

"You're eating her food."

"She's a fucking cat. She can catch her own food."

"So can you."

"Are you gonna fucking nag the whole time I'm here? You sound like Sofia."

"Leave her out of it," Sasha's voice turned cold, "she's dead and gone. You'd made her life miserable; I think you've done enough."

"Right. Saint Sofia and her little boy against the world. Who fed you two during the war, huh? You think I didn't know she was happy to see the back of me the minute I dropped the food off in her kitchen? She didn't give a shit about me."

"She fucking took you in! She could've left you on the side of the road after dad died, just like you real mother did!"

Sasha found himself on the floor, clutching the side of his face. It took a few moments for the pain to set in and for him to realize that Misha had hit him.

"You best watch you mouth little brother," Misha said calmly, "or these could be very long and painful four days."

Sasha spat a glob of blood on the floor; he'd cut the inside of his cheek with his teeth.

"You could've stayed at a goddamned hotel."

"I could have," Misha opened another can, "but then I would've missed all this fun we're having."

--

The work was turning out to be decidedly unpleasant. Apparently, Bryan was taking the week off despite having a three show line-up. Of course, everyone blamed Troy. Melissa wasn't speaking to him again, Linda wasn't speaking to him, and Keith kept looking at him and shaking his head, as if Troy was some unruly teenager no one knew what to do with. Even Mary seemed more subdued.

They filmed the show in record time, mostly due to the fact that no one was inclined to crack jokes or say much of anything. To be fair, the news consisted of the same old crap. Aside from the fact that Hostess was going bankrupt and people were panicking at the thought of losing their Twinkies, Troy was pretty sure they could have just aired the Friday's show.

Afterwards he met with his new Real Estate agent. With a tight gray bun and a crisp eggshell suit, Rose looked more like an elderly school principal than a saleswoman. She wasted no time though, shoving a file holder in Troy's hands and instructing him to look over the paperwork during the drive to 'minimize distractions.' He sincerely hoped that she meant distractions from the showing of the house, not the driving.

However, whatever doubts he had were quickly erased as they pulled up to the first property.
"This is a little over your price range if you've noticed."

Troy almost laughed. Little over the price range! At 2.2 million it was quite a bit over the price range but he had to admit that the property was impressive. An exquisite Victorian in the heart of Georgetown with heavy balconies and palace windows, the brick intimidating.

The inside matched the outside. Sure, it was lovely. Renovated kitchen filled with chrome, luxurious master bath, an enclosed patio fairly drowning in greenery. But it was unexpectedly dark. He could not see Sasha enjoying any part of it.

"There's no sun room," he said finally, four bedrooms and five bathrooms later.

"No. There's a patio."

"I can't put a piano out on the patio."

Her mouth tightened slightly but her tone remained even, "Well, shall we look at the next one then?"

November 20th, 2012

Tuesday

Sasha's apartment had never seemed so small. He couldn't get away from Misha; there was nowhere to go. He'd already gone to the store and ran the man's errands which involved forays into some distinctly fishy neighborhoods. He hated every moment of it. None of the contacts had given him any trouble; Sasha had always known just what to say and in which language, but it was so much like the old times that it turned his stomach. As a thirteen year old boy, he'd actually enjoyed it. He'd loved being useful, carrying messages back and forth, doing whatever was

needed. He'd enjoyed the respect that came with it. As an adult man he wanted to die from humiliation. He did it anyway. Anything to get Misha out of his life again and as quickly as possible.

Once it was done though, there was just him and Misha trapped in a small space. He stuck to one side of the apartment, curling up in the corner with a blanket and a book. He'd had to give up his bed but that didn't bother him so much. Zarya had seemed more offended at the new arrangement than he. No, what bothered him was Misha's presence. What bothered him was every moment he wasn't spending with Troy. Feeling like the time was running out and there was nothing he could do about it.

It was late afternoon and Sasha was dozing on the floor when a knock came from the door. In two steps Misha was peering through the peephole, his gun out and his finger on the trigger. Sasha felt a faint surge of hope. Maybe they'd found him after all. It would be almost worth it, getting deported, if he got to see Misha dragged out of here and put in jail.

Misha relaxed though, "It's some weird chick. Looks like a boy. You know her?"

Sasha's heart skipped a beat. He got up to look.

"It's Tina."

"Who the fuck is she?"

"Someone I work with. Must've found out I was sick. Looks like she's got something with her. Soup probably."

"Get rid of her."

"She's just a kid. She doesn't know anything about anything. She's not a threat."

"Are you fucking retarded or what? Every goddamned person who knows I'm here is a threat. Get rid of her. Now."

Sasha unlocked the door and opened just enough so she could see his face, very aware of Misha standing on the other side, his gun still out.

"There you are!" she grinned, "I heard you were sick so I brought you some soup. How are you feeling?"

"Crappy," he forced a smile, "and I think I'm contagious. So..."

"Oh please. I've already had everything this year. Did you forget I work in a detox?"

"Right. Listen, this is kind of a bad time--"

She gasped, "Is he in there? Is Troy in there? Oh my God, you have to let me meet him!"

"There's no one here. I'm alone. But I'm in the middle of something."

"In the middle of what?"

"It's personal! Listen--" he took a deep breath, "I appreciate you coming by, ok? But I gotta go. I'll see you next week."

He closed the door in her face feeling like he'd run a marathon. Misha moved up to the peephole again, only putting the gun away when the footsteps echoed down the building stairs.

"I'd forgotten how much you suck at this little brother. I hope for her sake you didn't make her suspicious."

"What the fuck was I supposed to say? She's a friend."

"Then lie better or you'll end up with dead friends."

--

Troy went to work, looked at two more ridiculously overpriced houses then went home and fidgeted. He started updating his blog and lost interest within the first fifteen minutes. He watched the news on Al-Jazeera, then a home improvement show, then a rerun of Game of Thrones. When America's Next Top Model came on he shut the TV off and threw the remote across the room. He tried cooking dinner and ended up with a congealed mess of something that used to be pasta. He ordered takeout and fidgeted some more.

What did he used to do before Sasha came along? Surely he used to have a life, even if it was boring. He would read sometimes, wouldn't he? Yes, reading something would be a good distraction. It took him half an hour to find his Kindle. By then the takeout had arrived. He ate and flipped through random books, unable to find anything appealing among the millions of available titles. He didn't actually want to read. He wanted Sasha.

Maybe he could give him a call, just to see how the work was going. He picked up his phone and immediately changed his mind. Sasha said that he'd call when he was free. Disturbing him would probably turn out to be counter productive. Besides, Troy didn't want to appear desperate. Even though he felt more so with each passing hour.

He looked through Rose's file holder again. There was one place in particular he really wanted to see. It was cheaper than all the rest, just under a million. It was the place he'd found on his own before Rose came along with a list of two and three million dollar properties. She'd seemed almost offended that someone in D.C. would consider selling a house for nine hundred thousand. He'd gone over the pictures many times, but hesitated in making her show it to him.

He wanted Sasha to be with him. He wanted to see it through Sasha's eyes, and he knew the whole thing was crazy. The man had probably never considered moving in with Troy. Still he couldn't help but think that maybe, if Sasha really liked the place, he might consider it. There were enough bedrooms that they wouldn't get in each other's way. It didn't have to mean anything if Sasha didn't want it to. They could be just two people, living together, sharing a kitchen.

Troy didn't even have to broach the subject of moving in. He could ask for the man's help; a fresh set of eyes to look over the place.

Maybe he could have Rose show it to both of them on Thursday if she didn't mind working on Thanksgiving.

November 22nd, 2012

Thursday

"I'm going out tonight," Sasha said.

"I don't think so," Misha said without taking his eyes off the 24" TV.

Sasha was sick of the TV. He never turned the damn thing on before Misha came along unless he wanted to watch the news. Now it was on all day and all night. He was sick of it. He was sick of Misha.

"You said I could see my client. I'm supposed to see him tonight."

Misha laughed at the TV and ignored him.

Sasha closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Took the omelette off the stove and dumped it on a plate. Brought it to Misha.

Misha took the plate without looking at him, "My coffee cup is empty."

"I need to go see my client tonight."

"You're going to pick up my plane ticket. After you get me another cup of coffee."

He barked another laugh, "Cut the umbilical cord? The guy's gotta fully grown man beard! Are you seeing this?"

He finally looked up at Sasha and seemed to realize who he was talking to.

He sighed, "What? What the fuck is it? What do you want?"

"I'm supposed to see my client tonight. You said I can go."

"Fine. But you're going to get my ticket first. The pick up is at four, afterwards you can go to hell for all I care."

"Great."

"Coffee, little brother. Less sugar this time."

Sasha resisted the urge to beat him to death with the empty cup.

--

Troy fidgeted. He knew he shouldn't have taken the day off. The attack on Suzanne Rice was in full swing; the GOP claimed she was single handedly responsible for the disaster in Benghazi while the liberal media pointed fingers and screamed 'racist' off the top of their lungs. It could have been the type of news show where he could be the most reasonable one in the bunch by never even opening his mouth. Instead, Al was covering for him and he was home, watching the clock tick. There were rumors floating about that the health care reform would become a bargaining chip in the deficit-reduction talks, Rev. Jessie Jackson had unceremoniously resigned the day before and Christie's approval rating had jumped from 48% to 67%. There was actual news going on.

Troy rearranged all the books in the bookcases by category.

When the phone finally rang he almost broke his neck trying to get to it. It was just Rose. She wanted to show the house early, was he free? He told her he'd see what he can do.

He debated with himself for a while then called CNN. After a considerable amount of hassle he was finally connected to Sasha's boss. The man informed him that Sasha had been out sick the entire week.

He stared at the phone until his eyes watered. Called Sasha and listened to the prerecorded message. Didn't leave a voicemail. Millions of things went through his head and none of them made any sense. Why would the man lie to him? What the hell was going on?

Brian's words crept up on him and he squashed them mercilessly. There could be a countless number of reasons why Sasha had lied, none of which have anything to do with Brian's delusions. Troy would not make any assumptions. He would go straight to the source.

--

He stood outside Sasha's building for ten minutes, debating with himself. Sasha had said that he would call when he was free. There could be any number of things the man might want to keep to himself. Troy didn't have to know everything. But it hurt. The idea that there were things Sasha wouldn't tell him, that he would lie. It was the lie that bothered him more than anything. He could have just said that he needed some time. Troy would have respected that.

Right?

Sure.

Then why was he here, about to barge in on the man?

Because Sasha could truly be sick. No matter how upset he was with the man, Troy wanted to help. That's why he was here. To help.

He entered the building and climbed the stairs, once again determined to talk to Sasha about this living situation. There was no reason for the man to live in a hovel. There was nothing safe about this crumbling nightmare of leaky pipes and police tape. Maybe it was too early for them to move in together, but there were other ways. Troy had connections, he knew people. He could find Sasha a much better apartment, a safer apartment. He could buy him one without even denting his checking account.

He knocked on the door. Waited. Knocked again.

"Who is it?"

Troy took a step back and away from the unfamiliar voice. Looked around carefully. This was the right apartment and the right door. He might have never been inside but he remembered Sasha's instructions clearly.

"I'm looking for Sasha," he said to the door, feeling stupid.

The door opened and a man measured him through the crack. A large man. A stranger. Troy's stomach twisted.

"Sasha's not here. Who are you?"

"I'm Troy, I'm Sasha's - " what? Sasha's what? Boyfriend? Was he really? Nothing like that was ever established.

Friend? Friends didn't lie to each other. Not about disappearing for days and strange large men in their apartments.

The man smirked,

"Right. Sasha's something, huh? Well," he opened the door and backed away from it,

"come in then."

Troy hesitated for a moment then stepped inside. The apartment was small and shabby. Clean but desperately poor. Sasha's clothes hung on a rope strung in between the two walls. The sight of the white cotton shirt hanging in front of him hit Troy like a fist.

"Where is he?"

The man settled on the only chair and propped his booted feet up on a table. The table groaned.

"He's out running an errand. Don't worry, he was coming to see you afterwards. He takes his appointments seriously. He always has."

"His appointments? Who are you?"

"That's right, we haven't been introduced," the man grinned,

"No reason to get upset, I'm not a customer. He doesn't tell those where he lives. Or he never used to."

Troy was starting to feel nauseous and disoriented, as if he were trapped in some nightmare where nothing made sense, where everything was slightly twisted.

“Who are you?”

“His brother. Half-brother. There isn’t much resemblance I guess, and I’m not as pretty as he is. Although he’s gone downhill over the years. Definitely doesn’t seem to be making as much as he used to. What are you paying him anyway? I thought he could afford a better place than this.”

“Excuse me?”

“No need to look shocked, I know how he operates. My lips are sealed. You’re not the first big shot he’s had. What do you do anyway? Law? Banking? You look familiar,” he tilted his head slightly, the mocking smile never slipping, “I know I’ve seen you. Politics? Is my little brother’s sugar daddy a State Rep? A Senator? Cause that would definitely be a first.”

There was a numb tingle traveling across Troy’s body, sinking into his fingertips, his hands.

“I’m not-- I’m not his...” he couldn’t even get the words out.

How is it after everything he’d seen and done in his life that those two small words suddenly struck him as incredibly vulgar and coarse? He couldn’t make himself repeat them.

“No?” Misha said, “My bad. Must be holding out for something big. Were you gonna make him your trophy wife? Cause he could definitely act the part. He’s always been good at spreading his legs and smiling pretty. He’s a decent cook too.”

He was going to suffocate.

Fleetinglly, he thought about Bryan and Reno, Nevada. He remembered the man from the bar, his large hand gripping Sasha’s wrist. Things Sasha wouldn’t talk about. Sasha stretched out on his bed, legs spread, a position that now struck him as practiced. Doubts, like splinters. Painful. Tearing.

He turned slowly and walked back out, without a word. Made it to the bottom of the stairway before he had to stop, grip the wall, and fight the nausea that threatened to climb up his throat. There was a dull roar in his ears, as if the world had suddenly sunk under water.

He wasn’t sure how he made it back to his car. But as he was pulling away from the curb, he was sure that he would not be coming back here.

--

Sasha turned the corner and stopped.

It was just a few moments. A rear end of a green BMW disappearing down the street. A familiar plate number. It could've been anyone. Troy's wasn't the only green BMW in the city, there could be dozens. Hundreds, for all Sasha knew. And how many of those had license plates that began with 37? More than one? It was possible. Unlikely but possible.

And yet, faint panic was already creeping its way through his stomach and chest. Even if it was him, Misha wouldn't have opened the door. Not after all that talk of staying low. Not after pulling out his gun and waving it around just because Tina knocked on the door. Right? Misha might be an asshole but he wouldn't risk his own safety just for the pleasure of ruining Sasha's life.

Right?

He climbed the stairs two at a time, heart beating furiously fast. Could he smell Troy's cologne in the stairway? No. He was being ridiculous. And paranoid. He pushed the apartment door open, stomach clenching in dread. Misha lounged in the chair, feet propped up on the table.

Deja-vu. Was it Monday again? Did he dream the whole week?

Misha grinned,

"That was fast. Did you run all the way there and back? You just missed your sugar daddy."

Sasha's mouth, his entire face turned numb. His throat felt hot. He couldn't breathe.

"What did you say to him?"

The words tore at his throat as if he were screaming, but he wasn't. It was barely a whisper. Barely loud enough to be heard over the pulse beating in his ears.

"Apparently, a bunch of shit he didn't know. Which is a pity, cause he did seem like a decent guy. The kind that gets all green and nauseous when prostitution comes up."

Sasha turned to the sink and locked his hands around the cool metal. His chest wouldn't stop constricting. Tiny black dots trembled in front of his eyes.

“Hey, it’s not my fault you lied to him,” Misha said, sounding cheerful.

There was a can of peaches next to the sink. Sasha studied it silently feeling fury build in his throat. It tasted like screams. It tasted like old blood in his mouth, all those mornings after Dom was through with him, like dust in mid-state rest areas and sweaty flesh and filth on his tongue. His fingers curled around it slowly, fitting into the grooves of the metal.

“Look on the bright side,” Misha went on, “Now that he knows, maybe he’ll fucking fork over some cash--“

Sasha moved lightening fast, the scream locked in his throat. Misha never got the chance to drop his legs from the table. The edge of the can slammed into his upper jaw, a burst of blood spraying Sasha’s arm. He went down with the chair, head bouncing off the hard floor. Sasha felt a rib crack under his knee as he landed on top of him. His vision was blurry, the black dots still dancing around, but it didn’t matter. He swung again, the edge landing against Misha’s temple this time, the crack barely audible over the blood rushing in his ears. Again, shattering the nose. Blood spattered in his face, his mouth. He could actually taste it now, thick and warm. His stomach spasmed violently.

He dry heaved, the can rolling away, leaving a streak of blood on the floor. Crawled off the limp form and into the corner behind the door. Threw up. Wiped his mouth with the bloody hand and threw up again. Curled up tightly, forehead pressed against knees, and told himself to breathe. Instead he sobbed, just once, and bit his tongue to make it stop.

It was done. All over. Finished.

Everything here and now. The floor under his knees. The clothes he was wearing. The sounds of the city outside. His hair, sticking to his cheek. Tina’s wide grin. Troy. It was all over. Done. He couldn’t even take the smallest bit of it with him now. Misha had made sure of it.

He wouldn’t cry. He hadn’t cried in years. But it took forever for his body to stop trembling. For his sight to focus again. It took forever to inhale without his breath hitching. By then, Misha was moving slightly. Groaning. His fingernails scraping on the floor.

Sasha got up, stumbling back into the corner, his hands leaving red prints on the wall. He made his way back to the sink slowly, feeling like he’s the one whose jaw and nose had been shattered. The blood on his sleeve left a patchwork of stains where he leaned against the wall and the table and the sink.

He grabbed a bucket from under the sink and filled it with water. Walked over to Misha and dumped it on him. Misha choked and rolled over, spitting out water mixed with blood. He'd never even had the chance to reach for the gun in the back of his pants. Sasha leaned over and grabbed it, the metal slippery in his hands.

"Get up."

Misha groaned. Sasha tried to avoid looking at his face. It was too much like his dad's. So much, that it took Sasha over two decades to do this, when he'd known all along that it was the only way. That this was the only language Misha would understand.

"Get up," he snapped again, throat raw.

"I'm gonna kill you," Misha said, voice wet, arms trembling from holding him up.

Sasha kicked him,

"Get up or I'm gonna put a bullet in your kidney."

"Fuck you."

His hand trembled on the gun. He stumbled to the bed and grabbed a pillow. It was heavy. Down filled, like the pillows he used to have back home. The most expensive and most wasteful thing he'd ever gotten for himself. Because he'd wanted to feel like Sasha. He'd wanted to feel normal here.

"You've got five seconds."

"You're fucking bluffing--"

Even through the pillow, the shot seemed too loud. Misha's shriek was even louder. Was the landlord home? Would she call the cops?

Misha clutched his upper arm, blood pouring through his fingers. Slid away, knocking the table over.

"Get up."

This time he listened.

Sasha forced himself to look at his face and was relieved that it didn't look like dad's any more. Not with a split upper lip and the nose bent in an impossible direction. He looked smaller now, standing a few feet away from Sasha, swaying on his feet. Smaller and cowardly and pitiful.

“Get out. If I see you again, I’m gonna kill you.”

Misha did.

For once in his life, he did what he was told, without saying a word.

--

It took hours to scrub all the blood off the floors and walls. He did it on autopilot, pausing to press his forehead against his knees every time he felt lightheaded. He kept the gun within reach the entire time, just in case. He wouldn’t put it past Misha to come back. After all, Sasha still had his plane ticket tucked in the back of his pants.

Afterwards he took a shower, as hot as he could stand it.

He knew he should pack and go. That same night. Get out of town as quickly as possible. He’d already planned it, had been preparing for days. There was \$500 of emergency money tucked in the back of the freezer, sealed tightly in a dirty jar. A box of black hair dye hidden under the bathroom sink. It would take less than an hour to pack, change his appearance and be on his way; he’d always traveled light. This, at least, he knew how to do well. Disappear.

But he didn’t want to. He didn’t want to leave the same way he’d always done. He had friends here, people who would worry, who would miss him. People who might file a missing person’s report and get cops on his tail before he even makes it into New York. And Tina deserved better. Michael deserved better. He wanted to say goodbye. Maybe he couldn’t tell them the truth but he could tell them a version of it at least. A couple of phone calls, first thing in the morning. What harm could it do now?

And Troy... Troy deserved an apology. Sasha could give him that much.

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